School of Media, Creative Arts and Social Inquiry

The Archipelago of Us

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Declaration

To the best of my knowledge and belief this thesis contains no material previously published by any other person except where due acknowledgment has been made.

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university.

Human Ethics (For projects involving human participants/tissue, etc.)
The research presented and reported in this thesis was conducted in accordance with the National Health and Medical Research Council National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2007)—updated March 2014. The proposed research study received human research ethics approval from the Curtin University Human Research Ethics Committee (EC00262), Approval Number # PERERS-HU01170.

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Renee Schipp

Date:...05.01.19.............

Abstract

'The Archipelago of Us' is the culmination of many years of research and reflections, grounded in the author's lived experience of 'un-Australia'—the excised world of the Indian Ocean Territories removed from the migration zone soon after September 11. The author takes the reader on a classic quest journey in an attempt to understand what it means to live and bear witness in a border-scape, a place that both is, and is not, 'Australia'.

Through a bricolage of memory, interviews, field work and historical research, this integrated creative thesis portrays the way in which these complex communities challenge us to think more broadly about what it means to be an Australian and asks at whose expense our contemporary national identity is forged. The work seeks to make visible people and communities that are largely unseen and unheard, primarily through the sharing of stories. At the same time, the thesis also shares the rich cultures of Chinese Christmas Islanders and Malay Christmas Islanders, as well as the Cocos Malay, using the oral stories of the latter to reveal the largely ignored history of the feudal dynasty of the Clunies-Ross family.

Through critiques of insularity, unpacking the cultural mythology of our 'badlands' (in Ross Gibson's terms), as well as drawing on alternative perspectives from island cultures through the field of tidalectics, 'The Archipelago of Us' strives to portray the way in which our ideal of our singular, 'Island Nation' undermines the very community the metaphor appears to serve. While ostensively a symbol of unification, Island Australia ultimately divides and excludes, sometimes with lethal consequences for those who do not fall within its embrace. This thesis asks for a bigger 'us' in the way we think of ourselves and our nation, and offers story as a human means of working toward that goal. Drawing on the work of Ghassan Hage and Deborah Bird Rose, story becomes the tangible means of entering into greater connection and responsibility, toward a future premised on understanding rather than ignorance or fear.

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This thesis is dedicated to Nek Su, for his courage and wisdom.

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Table of Contents

Declaration *i*

Abstract *ii*

Acknowledgements *iii*

Introduction: Approaching the Archipelago of Us *1*

Christmas Island **10**

1 Returning 13

2 Trees Honour the Company they Keep 19

3 Our Tenuous Place 33

4 Suspension 37

5 Remembering 41

6 Pete Parts the Wild Horse’s Mane 49

7 A Door in my Ribs 65

8 Hand Held to the Flow 70

9 Behind the Wire 76

10 A Person Like Any Other 80

11 The Wild Air 85

12 Why He Stays 93

13 Walking Backwards toward Light 102

14 An Island of Hungry Ghosts 118

15 Blue 124

16 Turning Back 131

17 My Island Home 134

Cocos (Keeling) Islands **152**

18 West Island (Pulu Panjang) 154

19 The End of the Line 163

20 Quarantine 181

21 South Island (Pulu Atas) 191

22 North Keeling (Pulu Keeling) 198

23 Home Island (Pulu Selma) 204

24 Direction Island (Pulu Tikus) 230

25 North Point 236
26 Heading Home 240
Conclusion: The Archipelago of Us 244
Appendices 257
Appendix 1: Interviewee Information Sheet and Consent Forms 257
Appendix 2: Key Questions asked of Research Participants 260
Appendix 3: Forgotten Children Report Submission 261
Sources of Facts and Quotations 263
References 274

List of Figures

Figure 1: Brown booby, Margaret Knoll 243

Figure 2: Cocos Malay women relaxing at a pondok on Pulu Cheplok 255

Figure 3: Mating crickets in Chinese Graveyard, Christmas Island. 256

Introduction: Approaching the Archipelago of Us

After I completed my honours thesis on the Cocos (Keeling) Islands in 2013 (centred around a collection of poetry in response to the Indian Ocean Territories), I thought that I had come to terms with what I had witnessed during the three years I lived in Australia's most isolated territory. Yet when I moved back to mainland Australia in 2014, though thousands of kilometres away, these distinctive island spaces continued to subtly work away at me, challenging the way I saw myself, my relationship to others and the living world, and my conceptions of the country in which I lived.

This thesis was initially proposed to be a reflection on five different topographies (including Christmas Island and the Cocos (Keeling) Islands)[1], and how each of these distinct places affected my sense of self as an individual and an Australian. However, from the moment I boarded a plane in August 2016 to conduct my research back in these island-scapes, the surprising complexity of emotions that I experienced during the duration of the flight alone flagged that something important was happening. Setting foot back on islands' shores, I knew I would not be writing about anywhere else. The islands and I had unfinished business.

Processing the personal impact of my return, the focus of this thesis shifted. Using Vivienne Gornick's *The Situation and the Story* as a guide, I decided to invite readers to come with me on what Gornick describes as a shared 'voyage of discovery'.[2] In this process, the writer actively takes on the persona of a reliable narrator, someone who attempts to be completely honest and transparent with herself and the reader in a kind of pact, an intimacy, forged in order to gain the reader's trust. Gornick writes,

> The poet, the novelist, the memoirist—all must convince the reader that they have some wisdom and are writing as honestly as possible to arrive at what

[1] Fitzroy Crossing, discussed briefly in *The Archipelago of Us*, was included among them.
[2] For a guide as to how referencing has been used in this thesis, please see page 8.

> they know. To the bargain, the writer of personal narrative must also persuade the reader that the narrator is reliable…that the narrator is speaking the truth.

Gornick tells us that the situation is the context or the circumstance (in this case, Christmas Island and the Cocos (Keeling) Islands in 2016) while the story is 'the emotional experience that preoccupies the writer.' In the act of clarifying the affective elements of an event (or series of events) on the page, the narrator writes into something larger than the immediate circumstance, something that transcends the particularities of his or her own story. I would argue that when writers are at their best, they write into a common humanity. As McInerney puts it, 'the [story] that belongs to history…the shape of what is oldest and deepest in us…through these particular, unique individual details…we enter their story and experience it as our own.'

Gornick goes on to say, 'Penetrating the familiar is by no means given. On the contrary, it is hard, hard work.' And hard work it was. At times the level of authenticity, of honesty that Gornick required in the process of clarifying the affective elements of my journey on the page, was intensely confronting. This unpacking often demanded I inhabit the depths of my own and others' vulnerability, sometimes unearthing and exposing successive acts of violence done in my country's name.

There were days when this voyage of discovery allowed me to feel so expansive the world outside my window glowed with wonder. On other days, the writing became so confronting I simply could not keep going; I could not stay with what was unfolding on the page. On these days I would leave my desk in order to remember the sensation of sun on my skin, or I would drive into the small, country town where I live just to witness the ordinary and small acts of kindness people extend to each other every day—a woman smiling as she handed a customer their cappuccino, or someone patting a dog in a park. Yet despite the sometimes harrowing nature of my research, my desire to understand and bear witness was so compelling, I would ultimately discover what Pipher calls the ability for 'transcendent coping'. This story sat in my body like a living thing willing to be born

and I would inevitably find myself back at my desk, writing my way forward, writing my way toward self-knowledge and deep understanding of the layers of history in the places where I had lived.

Gornick's guidance around writing toward a new wisdom for both the narrator and reader in non-fiction, is consistent with the aims of practice-led research. Though there are diverse and sometimes conflicting ideas about how to define practice-led research, there is a general consensus that practice-led research implies a 'prolonged engagement with a specific research question' that is often 'experiential, qualitative and non-quantifiable.' Green also points out that practice-led research is often the only methodology available to answer certain research questions, and the deeply entangled personal and political elements in *The Archipelago of Us* would seem to support Green's assertion.

During my return to the islands, as my initial research question about five different topographies failed to adequately relate to the evolving new focus of my research (that new focus being a move toward understanding my complex relationship with the Indian Ocean Territories), my practice shifted to become largely research-led as I followed the themes and issues raised by my interviewees, as well as my research into the territory's history. As I transcribed the interviews on my return to the mainland, I began to consider why understanding the stories of islanders was important for myself and others. This helped me to frame a new research question, the question that drove this thesis: 'How has my sense of self as an individual and an Australian been altered or challenged by living in the Indian Ocean Territories and why was returning to the physical spaces of the islands so vital in understanding this change?' Returning to the physical spaces became key. Settling on this question, my work began to be driven by a practice-led model once again.

In their analysis of creative production in academic contexts, Smith and Dean argue that practice-led research and research-led practice are not separate models but operate as 'an interactive cycle and web', a description that mirrors my own process. This rhythm of moving between practice-led research and research-led practice was vital to the organic evolution of *The Archipelago of Us*. I found it incredibly satisfying to experience the way in which research could inspire creative

work as well as the way creative work could inform the direction of research. Smith and Dean's analysis is also pertinent as their description of the creative process as fluid is reflective of the tidal spaces to which my thesis responds.

As the fluidity of my research process would suggest, it is not only the *what*, but the *how* of our work as writers that creates a sense of meaning and coherence within the narrative. *The Archipelago of Us* draws on the work of island writers in the field of tidalectics. Such an approach challenges traditional binaries such as land and sea, self and other, replacing these bordered categories with a world view that is inherently reciprocal, fluid and dynamic. The term 'tidalectics' was first coined by the late poet Kamau Brathwaite but has been expanded upon by theorists such as Elizabeth Deloughrey and Edouard Glissant. The work of these writers uses the motion of the sea as a way of explaining an alternative model of time and space, a 'trans-oceanic connectivity' that resists insular conceptions of self and nation. To be writing the islands in a way that boxes writing into 'creative' and 'exegetical' work, seemed to be at odds with the very dualities this thesis attempts to resist. The integration of the exegetical component in *the Archipelago of Us* was a conscious choice reflecting the fluidity of the spaces that had driven the work, but also a push back against the way knowledge is still divided and legitimised along familiar binaries in academic institutions, a point that I argued at the outset of my research in a collaborative article written with Robertson et al.[3]

In her article, 'Slowly—Writing into the Anthropocene', Deborah Bird-Rose argues that it is precisely this dichotomous and fragmented way of seeing the world that led us to our current disconnection from each other and the natural world. Bird-Rose argues the disconnection entailed in a Cartesian mentality is countered by 'ethics emerging from emplaced, embodied encounters', slow work in the 'physical, local contexts of our actual lives.' These personal encounters allow us to undo the harm in the moral distancing that comes from an us/them, self/other logic, instead entering back into a world of reciprocity, relationality and mutuality, an almost tidal world of flux, embracing the movement back and forward between beings.

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[3] Pettitt-Schipp and Robertson (et al.) argue that despite the growing acceptance of creative theses as part of students' doctoral studies in Australian universities, knowledge is often still constructed along 'familiar binaries such as rational/irrational, objective/subjective, and masculine/feminine.'

My interviews with Christmas and Cocos Islanders allowed me to enter into the embodied and emplaced encounters that Bird Rose advocates. Yet the unique cultures of Christmas Island and the Cocos (Keeling) Islands also created some distinctive challenges as I went about my ethics approval and interview process. My first challenge was not being sure before I returned the islands what it was, precisely, that I wanted to know, so therefore it was difficult for me to articulate to the people I would interview on the islands what I wanted from them. My second challenge was my past experiences in the Indian Ocean Territories had taught me that islanders are wary of mainlanders interviewing them. This was largely due to the damage done by media both on Christmas Island and the Cocos (Keeling) Islands, many articles written about the islands involving perceived breaches of trust, or an active misrepresentation of complex situations.

Though far from being a naturally spontaneous person, I knew it would be counter-productive to send formal letters to islanders asking them for permission to interview them for my research. The formality would be intimidating for many, and my relationships were formed with islanders as a teacher, not a writer, so it would be difficult to convey what my research was about, especially as I was still in the process of ascertaining my central research question. As such, I only organised a small number of interviews while still in Perth. One was with Gordon Thompson. As Shire President and General Secretary of the Union of Christmas Islands Workers, Gordon was a public figure used to being in the limelight and not shy of potential controversy. I also contacted Trish from Parks Australia as she was a close friend, as well as Pete Ch'ng as we had a fairly close relationship through working together at the school on Christmas Island. I was also able to arrange the interview with Nek Su (whose recount of recent history on Cocos is pivotal to the second half of this thesis) through my friendship with Nek Su's partner on social media.

Of the other nine interviews, almost all were organised while in the Indian Ocean Territories, and many came about in the organic way in which they are described within this thesis. This approach was in keeping with the way things tended to naturally evolve on the islands, a point reinforced by the way in which all my invitations to potential participants in the territory were accepted. Sometimes this process seemed incredibly fortuitous, as in the case of Zainal Majid. Zainal was

an islander I did not know personally but wanted to interview due to his role as President of the Islamic Council as well as a witness to the Christmas Island boat tragedy. This interview came about as the result of a conversation with the local mechanic at Pete's Tai Chi class.

I knew some interviewees would have reservations about being interviewed, especially on sensitive topics such as the treatment of asylum seekers. This was the case with Jo, an interviewee and friend on Christmas Island. However, I knew if I could speak face to face with Jo and outline the transparency of the process, Jo would feel reassured. Of all the interviewees, Jo did need the most amount of encouragement to participate, but in the interview process I believe both of us experienced the importance of the stories she shared. To reassure her, I not only sent her a copy of the transcript, but also emailed Jo her chapter in the final draft of the thesis before submission. Jo was reassured by being able to read the way in which her interview was used in my thesis, so much so that she ended up agreeing to the use of her real name in the work (initially we had considered using a pseudonym). Other interviewees, such as the witness of the boat tragedy in the chapter *My Island Home,* chose to remain anonymous because of the perceived potential for controversy in response to the stories she shared. Similarly, the character of 'Tom' was constructed, and identifying details from the speaker's recount removed, to protect the identity of the person who shared their experiences of the boat tragedy in the chapter, 'A Door in My Ribs'. 'Tom's' story was not told in an interview context but resulted from an informal conversation that took place by chance. The chapter was written from recollections made once back on the mainland, and therefore no formal ethics process was involved.

Before the interview (sometimes immediately before), participants were given a generic sheet explaining my research as well as consent forms to sign, as required by Curtin Human Research Ethics approval (see Appendix 1). Though each interview was different and contained questions specific to the interviewee, key questions were asked of all participants (see Appendix 2). Though interviewees answered many of the set questions, it became very important to me during the process of interviewing to allow the interviewee to largely direct the interview, so

occasionally I would leave out several questions as I tried to allow for a mutuality in the dialogue similar to that which Bird Rose advocates.

However, in the interview process I also experienced the limits of Bird Rose's emphasis on relationality and mutuality. Though 'Slowly — writing into the Anthropocene' was central to this thesis, I discovered that Bird Rose's approach in this work, did not adequately acknowledge the power relationships that exist between interviewer and interviewee. This became apparent to me when interviewing the Cocos Malay in particular, as the elders in the community were part of a cultural minority that had received little to no formal education, while by contrast, I was a white Westerner researching at a state university. Bird Rose's 'embodied encounters' must therefore be seen as aspirational; mutuality and relationality between subjects is what researchers should strive toward through the act of speaking, deep listening and a willingness to be changed. Full mutuality may never be achieved, but in the act of consistently working toward that goal, we can go some way toward eroding the damaging duality of 'self' and 'other'.

On my return to the mainland, in a process I can only describe as slow listening, I transcribed each of the thirteen interviews (some of which had gone for almost three hours), until I had a document amounting to well over fifty thousand words. This process felt consistent with the kind of slow work Bird Rose advocates, an emphasis on doing things carefully, of taking time. In Bird Rose's words, 'slow is a movement toward quality over quantity, connection rather than fragmentation, and toward ethical mutualities rather than self-interest alone…a movement toward thought and attention.' This process of slow listening felt vital to the integrity of the work, a physical effort to transcend my own inward-looking gaze, to deeply engage with the lived reality of others.

Each interviewee was given a copy of their transcript with the opportunity during a four-week period to correct any errors or remove anything that they wished to retract from the record. Only minor alterations were requested by one participant. All interviewees had a strong command of English except for Nek Su, who was happy for his partner, Jeannette, to translate for him. Another Cocos Islander (whose transcript did not end up being included) was able to get her daughter-in-law to translate questions she did not understand.

Despite this transparent process, should the content of this thesis go to publication after examination, questions remain as to whether the contents of this creative work will make it difficult for me to return to the islands again. This has been a challenging and recent realisation as the outcomes of my research, particularly around the history of the Clunies-Ross dynasty, surprised me. However, sharing the stories unearthed in this work has felt so utterly compelling, the risk of being judged, even despised, for the difficult truths that have been exposed seems worthwhile. However, the potential of my research to cause hurt and anger in a community in which I felt welcomed and accepted remains deeply confronting. It is difficult to weigh this cost against the potential benefit of publication, which I would argue is the work's ability to challenge readers to reflect more critically about Australian national identity.

This thesis' journey of discovery begins with my flight back to the Indian Ocean Territories in August 2016. The first half of the work focuses on my return to Christmas Island while the second half of my thesis centres around my time in the Cocos (Keeling) Islands. At the conclusion of the section on my return to Christmas Island is a reflection on my experiences in the broader context of the island's recent political history. In this chapter I explore the role of Christmas Island in maintaining narratives of national sovereignty in Australia. This segment also critiques popular insular notions of Australia perpetuated by iconic authors such as Tim Winton. Drawing on the work of critics of insularity such Suvendrini Perera and Jacqueline Rose, as the well as the concept of 'badlands' explored by Ross Gibson in *Seven Versions of an Australian Badland*, this chapter then calls for a national willingness to listen and remember in forming more constructive narratives of national belonging.

To avoid disrupting the narrative, all referencing has been included at the end of the work. Sources of facts and quotes have been listed by page number under chapter headings, while a larger bibliography is included in the final pages. The references for footnotes are also included under chapter headings.

The final chapter of *The Archipelago of Us* reflects on themes around national identity. The conclusion first centres on 'Slowly — writing into the Anthropocene' by Bird Rose, making links between Bird Rose and tidalectics in order

to form alternative conceptions of self and state. The chapter then focuses on Ghassan Hage's analysis of Australia's 'paranoid nationalism', critiquing the popular belief in Australia as a 'Fair Go' nation with a particular focus on the White Australia Policy. *The Archipelago of Us* concludes by arguing for a reconceptualization of our 'Island Nation', offering an 'archipelagic' model as a more representative and inclusive imaginary. Finally, the work asks the reader to assume 'courageous responsibility' when considering ideas of 'others' in response to the stories shared, a courage that must also be summoned if white Australians in particular, are to come to terms with Australia's violent history.

Christmas Island

No one knows what causes an outer landscape to become an inner one.

Margaret Atwood

It is not that you set out to oppose authority. In the act of writing you simply do. Your job, your reason for writing, is to uncover what the state and the conventions of your town normally hide. That's why you want to write—to tell what hasn't been told.

Grace Paley

The silence and the silence. This morning the world is still. One after the other booby birds fly past, a low, white stream, feathered and continuous, running along island's edge and weaving around palm trees. Just after dawn, I stepped out the door of the cottage, feeling like a girl stepping into a dream, into a scape of haze and humidity. To the west, light rested apricot, diffuse, over the glassed surface of sea. Just above, frigatebirds angled and twisted at speed, twin tail-feathers scissoring, steering their Jurassic bodies over the ocean. Other frigates reeled dark and high in the air, spectres coming in and out of cloud.

The sun is higher now and the day beginning to get hot, so I dress, get into the small 4WD a friend has lent me, and drive slowly and wide-eyed into memory, into Silver City, where tired flats are stacked high on the hill in front of a glinting panorama of ocean. An old man in a worn, cotton tank-top leans out from an aluminium window, looking out as I look in. The streets are quiet. All along the turnoff red crabs are rain-glazed and paint-bright. Behind them, the jungle rolls by dense and layered, shade upon shade, uncountable shapes; palms and pandanas, vine and banyan, tree ferns and elephant ears, a terrain of green reaching wide for light. But it is the smell, rich and complex, the smell of journeys treading carefully over forest floor, the smell of being startled to wonder, balm of abundance and beauty. The memory of being silenced by virulence—the earth's resounding hope—opening. Despite all that took place, being opened. It is the smell of life and death, rot and growth, and of children stepping with me, stepping into me, their trace laced deep under my skin.

1

Returning

The latent anxiety I feel about returning to Christmas Island is expressed by the way I have not finished packing two hours before my flight. I cannot bring myself to believe this is happening, that it is possible to return. My husband and I make it to the airport an hour before my flight, and it is a rushed goodbye, lips meeting briefly, holding each other's eyes for a second before I dash through the entryway, winding my way quickly through empty Border Force lanes, passport stamped moments before the sign flashes 'gate closed.'

On the plane there are too many people. I cannot think, don't want to write, though I know this moment is important. Instead I look out the window at the bland tarmac, at the smear of cloud and drizzle of rain, and feel a huge sense of disassociation, a complete lack of focus. At dawn both the day and I are hazed.

When the plane lifts off the tarmac it is as though a door closes behind me, I am being propelled forward toward something shimmering and wild in my memory, but I can't feel anything. I sit with my head resting against the glass of the window as Perth's cityscape disappears behind cloud. Time moves slowly. The woman next to me talks animatedly to her friend. I hope she does not talk to me.

After some time, the clouds begin to part and I can see the blue of the sea; we are still flying low. Soon the barely raised reef of what must be the Abrolhos Islands comes into view and something in me stirs, like a worm , or a caterpillar in its twig case. By the islands are the parallel forms of large ships, all pointing northward. The mottled shapes of low islands are abstract from this height, and the repetition of forms in the north-facing ships is beautiful, but I do not get my camera out. I watch them, this scarce suggestion of land in a bold canvas of sea, framed by floating statements of state and industry. A low hum, a crackle and whir of synapses wake me like the click of fingers close to an ear, sharpen the haze of my mind and I press against the window, feel my heart quicken, my eyes alive.

Using my book, I continue to avoid eye contact with the woman next to me, but I am watching now. I am watching the expansive blue plain of water, the way the clouds begin to grow vertical and become voluptuous, spill up and over themselves forming luminous kingdoms. The women next to me do not seem to see as they chatter across the aisle. I try to ignore them, but soon begin to register they are talking about places and names I know, accommodation and tourist sites from the Cocos Islands. As they do, it dawns on me the plane's route has changed. Since the removal of large numbers of fly-in fly-out workers from Christmas Island as the detention centre's activities were scaled down, it is no longer imperative the flights serve Christmas Island first. Thursday's flight lands on Cocos, then goes on to Christmas Island. I suddenly realise I will land on the atoll before the monolith of Christmas Island, and suddenly feel unprepared, cheated. I thought I was doing this trip in chronological order, but now I am first going to a place I called 'home' and meant it.

After two hours of flying above cloud, the pilot tells us we are about to descend, I lean to look out of my window, and there it is. A sensation akin to pain rises in my chest. Something I had lost is being gifted back to me, an exquisite offering lit by morning sun. The day is a deep and brilliant blue, the water in the lagoon is as clear as glass. I look down at the sand fanning around island's edge, its shapes of ocean, coral and deep blue holes, a painting patterned and brilliant. Over the deepest part of the lagoon, north toward Direction Island, the colour is steeped beyond comprehension.

A single dinghy parts the impossible colour with a clean 'V' of white. The plane arcs sharply around the edge of the atoll, turns back and begins to descend over roads I have known by foot and bike, pacing and peddling under palm trees into headwind. We fly over beaches where I met hermit crabs, grey nurse sharks and egrets, over the large fig at Trannies Beach where a pilot handed me a small ball; the fluffy round form of a baby tern. It all streams past, salt plain and palms, friends' homes and the one road on which I can see the local bus heading out to the ferry at Rumah Baru. Images, memories and faces flash up, the wheels come down and we bounce onto the tarmac, breaking heavily. And this—this was the view from

my home: airstrip, palm trees and azure lagoon, night herons stalking insects in grass.

The plane reaches the edge of the runway and turns, crawls slowly back the way it came. Now looking out the other side of West Island I can see the sea, the reef, the homes along the runway, my blue home facing the runway. They have cut down the palm trees. I take it all in as the plane comes to a halt and the gangplank is attached and a forklift drives noisily in. The cabin door is opened, and I am greeted by a scent called home: dry grass and salt, sun and trade winds. We are asked to disembark. I feel completely disarmed, I am unprepared. I can't believe I have to disembark.

Some familiar Cocos-Malay faces smile at me as I walk down the metal stairs to the tarmac, past two girls, faces framed in colourful tudungs, whom I recognise as my former students. I don't stop, I am walking past the rope and people in their Border Force uniforms, out down the beige 70s hall and into sunlight, out into a crowd of faces, so many faces of people I thought I had left and would not see again. I am hugged briefly but warmly, then through the crowd comes a slim, short woman with dreadlocks. 'Trish,' I stare, she puts her arms around me, and we hold each other long and close.

'Quick, come and see the boys!' She takes me by the hand into the brick building of the Club where Tiago and Sol share a large lounge chair eating bread. Tiago, who had slept on my deck as a newborn, is now sitting tall and straight like any child. It is too much to take in. 'Do you want to take some bread with you to Christmas Island?' Trish offers, and Tony, Trish's husband (and part-time baker) comes over with a wide smile.

'Well, well— look who the plane brought in!!' We hug and I stand dazed and overwhelmed.

'No, no Trish,' I say, 'my bag is chockers with veggies, but thank you.'

'Are you sure? Do you want a smoothie? Tony is doing banana smoothies too, now!'

'No,' I laugh, remembering Trish's eternal generosity, 'I better get back on, but I will be back, I will see you guys in a week.'

‘Are you sure?’ Trish says, ‘you probably have another five minutes before they make the call.’

‘Yes, you know me Trish, I am a Virgo, don’t want to miss my plane,’ but the truth is it is all so sudden it is too much and I need to retreat. We hug again and I step through the gate, between familiar faces in Border Force uniforms who still insist on patting me down and doing a bag check, then I am seated back by my window on the plane.

Leaving the atoll, I feel quiet and still, grateful for the now vacated seat beside me. As the plane arcs once again, I turn back and look over the outer reef where the waves break, forming a bright white fringe at the end of cobalt sea spreading forever and uninterrupted to the horizon. Where the reef ends and the atoll starts, the lines become painterly, like great brushstrokes made from above, a paintbrush moving in continuous smooth strokes around each small island. On each islet I am implicated: a camping place here, a sailing trip there, here paddling over the wide back of an ancient turtle feeding on sea grass. At this height, the detail is unknowable but incredibly beautiful, an artwork in turquoise, blues and greens. I crane my neck but its horseshoe shape grows smaller, barely visible, then disappears. I sit animated, alert. Now it is nine hundred kilometres to that very different place of brutal beauty, to a semi-submarine mountain steeped in strata of dark history, where life pushes up shouting and glimmering, fringed by delicate crochet of sea foam in light.

As we near Christmas Island, the plane descends through dense vapour, so at first the scene is hidden, then quite suddenly the clouds’ thick forms part and the island’s image is revealed—a place fit for pirates and Crusoes, castaways and children with conch shells. The rainforest is so lush it spills over the sides of cliffs and its virulent canopy catches light and folds its secrets into shadow. Overhead, golden bosun birds shimmer, trailing bright plumes over deep green. A glimpse, then the plane hits the tarmac and the brakes groan, working hard to pull up quickly on the island’s alarmingly short runway. Suddenly, as the plane comes to a halt, a large, black drone appears by my window, moves sideways and up, jerky and

erratic. I am thrown, shocked, but my attention is turned toward the plane's interior as passengers start to disembark. When I turn my gaze back to the window, the drone has gone as quickly as it came, leaving me to wonder if I ever saw it at all.

As those of us on board step onto the tarmac and its hot-bath humidity, my lungs remember, breathe deep. Inside the airport (that looks more like a shed by a paddock than a place to board a plane) we queue briefly, then collect our luggage. My bags bulging with stores of fresh vegetables are glanced at, then I am waved warmly through by Border Force officers. I push my trolley out into the sunlight to see my friend Jo waving as she stands by the rail.

'Hi,' she hugs me like we saw each other last week, 'I hope you don't mind but I am also picking up Pete. He was on your flight.' As she speaks, Pete steps through the doorway and waves. Pete is a friend of my husband's and the Mandarin teacher at the local high school. He is also one of the interviewees I teed up while still on the mainland. He turns to me and we hug and then pile our things in the back of the small 4WD, our bags and veggies spilling over onto the seat at the back.

Jo and Pete chat in the front of the car as Jo drives. I stay quiet, extracting myself from the conversation to take in the terrain in front of me. To return. I have returned. I feel a sensation like heat course through my body, hold it in my chest, will it to wait. Jo drops me at my accommodation and I am grateful to be left alone. I place food along the bench, my books in piles beside the bed. I step out on the deck. Several metres in front of me the ocean jostles, is edgy in a way I have seen nowhere else. I watch its uneasy aspect and think about the ocean floor, its impossible depths—no wonder the water cannot break or resolve.

I grab my swimming gear and jump on the bike left leaning out the back of the cottage. Its tyres are flat. Undeterred I set off, pushing hard against the resistance of rubber, past frangipani trees leaning against mildewed walls, out into heat and light, past the supermarket, under the enormous industrial arm of the phosphate chute to where the island's cliffs rise like a sudden foreign country and trees layer their lives up impossible slopes, leaf against leaf, tree against tree, an exultation of life over which scores of birds circle, reel, glide or come to rest.

Whatever was left sleeping in me now wide-eyed, nerves quick to know, *oh this*, *you are here, you have returned!* In the cove I lean my bike against the pergola

and slip out of my clothes. I am grateful for sun on my body, on my bathers, the memory of heat. Water like a child's bath. Stepping in. Afraid of sharks, I stick close to the shallow reef, laugh out loud through my snorkel as blue-green parrot fish crunch audibly, their small mouths working at the coral, the sudden spurts of white as they excrete out sand.

2

Trees Honour the Company they Keep

On the day after I arrive, I drive through my old suburb of Silver City, head still swarming with memories, past my old home perched high on the hill looking out over the watery arc of earth. The singular peak of Christmas Island thrusts three hundred and sixty metres above the Indian Ocean, its distinct aspect bending the skyline for the population of around one thousand eight hundred people who live on the island's slopes. The horizon appears like curve of an enormous glass marble glinting in sun. Beyond this vista, only three hundred and sixty kilometres away, Java sits out of eyeshot on the other side of the sea. Christmas Island consists of an area of only one hundred and sixty-five square kilometres, so from the air it is easy to take in the island's form in its entirety—its distinct three-pronged shape, formed by North West Point and Egeria Point to the West, as well as the aptly named South Point and North East Point. From the car window, however, I can only see as far as Smith Point at the end of the cove, the water dazzling, a shifting sheet of light between drab buildings.

I bring my eyes back to the road as I reach the turnoff at Poon San, and rather than heading back to the cottage, I take a right turn and drive out of town to Margaret's Knoll on the east side of the island. Taken aback at the intensity of my responses in the last twenty-four hours, as I drive I am trying to form a question in my mind so I can understand exactly what is happening. Why is it so incredibly important for me to be here? I turn, drive past the airport, past giant robber crabs at the edge of the asphalt, until I hit the wide dirt road of North South Baseline. It is a short trip through the rainforest to the turnoff. Turning from the main road and into jungle, the track is littered with puddles from recent rains. Red crabs scatter as the car bounces into the carpark. No one else is here.

There is something bigger at stake for me in my return, something that spans more than the Indian Ocean Territories, a question arising largely, but not only, from the three years I spent out here on the islands. As I walk toward the

lookout, I cast my mind back, try and trace the first fine fractures in what has become a widening crack in my world. My mind casts its gaze back to 2009, two years before I came to Christmas Island. I am sitting in the back of a Troopy heading out into a haze of heat and red dirt, boabs and spinifex flickering by. My excitement and slight trepidation begin to grow the further we head into the heart of this country. Through the small windows in the back of the 4WD, I can see the wide, blue sky spreading out to the horizon in every direction. As we come into Fitzroy Crossing in the Kimberley region of Western Australia, a flock of brown kites heralds our arrival, circling slow, languid and watchful in the heat.

Twenty minutes on the other side of town we bounce down a dirt road until the community comes into view. It is a remarkable sight. Despite the distinctively flat plain, all the buildings are perched high above the ground on impressive steel stilts. The roof of the school, my principal and driver tells me, is designed to double as a helipad in case the river breaks its banks in the wet. In the evening, voluptuous clouds throw their billowing brilliance into the azure sky above plains of dry grasses. Egrets and jabirus, edgy and elegant, gather by small pools of briny water in the dry riverbed. Summoning courage, I walk along the riverbank with a hefty stick and listen to the dogs howl in packs nearby, watch Brahman bulls arrive in clouds of dust, navigating down the bank to the water.

My trip to the Kimberley has come with its warnings—the struggles of the communities here are no secret. Incarceration rates for Aboriginal children in Western Australia are fifty-two times higher than non-Aboriginal children, one of the highest rates of incarceration in the world. Both Fitzroy Crossing and Halls Creek are largely cordoned off in the minds of West Australians. When visible at all, our country's media casts them as dangerous and unpredictable spaces, wild and untameable. However, it is precisely this wildness that has drawn me. I have packed my bag with stickers and shiny pens, happy to bribe my way through the three weeks of relief teaching work before I head back to Perth again. What could possibly happen in three weeks? But as I am shown my classroom and left to my own devices, it is not the stickers or pens the students want, they want my sunflower seeds, salty plums and almonds. They are hungry. I am shocked, but happy to be amongst these playful and spirited children, happy to share. In the first

week all my snacks are claimed and my packets of pens and stickers remain unopened. What rattles me out here is not the children's behaviour, it is their hunger.

The principal tells me that the community is in deep mourning. The Indigenous people here have just lost an important local artist and elder, and a young man has committed suicide by hanging himself with the inner tube of a tyre. Several days after this revelation, the students and I make paper together. I hang their new rectangles of pulp to dry on the verandah in the afternoon sun. While on duty at lunchtime, I discover the children gathered around the makeshift washing line. The children laugh, making gagging sounds as they form nooses around their necks with the rope. I pack the line away and hang the wet paper from the steel railing. The principal tells me to watch out for the dead boy's twin—he is on suicide watch. Two days ago, they had to coax him down from the helipad, she says. So I do, I look out for him, and he struggles. The boy and I play Uno on the mat while the class waits. He settles down. There appears to be no support for him or me, the dead boy's mother or anyone in this tiny town. For several nights, the football oval is flooded with light; I pull the covers over my ears, my eyes. I have been told what it means, but don't know what I am supposed to do when the evil spirits are in town.

It is a long way from the desert to this mountainous island closer to Indonesia than Australia, but there is something that happened in that remote place that speaks to what I witnessed here, something that deeply unsettles what I believed about my country and, in turn, how I see my place within it. I was raised with a strong sense of my own good fortune. I was brought up with the proud knowledge I was seventh-generation Australian, traced my heritage through the landscape—the Wheatbelt, Swan Valley and South-West—back to the arrival of the ship Caroline on Garden Island in the 1800s.[4] I was born in the 'Lucky Country',

[4] This pride has been somewhat tempered by reading the work of Haebich, Pascoe and others, and more generally, the writings of Owen (as seen in the chapter, 'My Island Home'). These writers have been pivotal in helping me to conceive of the fact that my family's farming, logging and viticultural activities contributed to the dispossession of land and experiences of ongoing trauma for local Noongar and Balardong people. The shame or guilt we experience as result of our ancestors' actions is what Ghassan Hage refers to as 'polluting memories'. He argues that owning polluting memories is a necessary part of learning to be responsible citizens—what he terms 'participatory belonging'.

belonged in the 'Land of the Free', of the 'Fair Go'. But I no longer seem to be able to make sense of the nation where I live or what that means for who I am.

I walk along the short boardwalk under bright strata of foliage, up steps and onto a small platform perched at the edge of a breathtakingly high cliff. Thick clouds have gathered and the island-scape has become monochrome, darkness and light. The wind is cool, the ocean glints silver, sky curtained by cloud, the rainforest plummeting dramatically at improbable angles down the cliffs below me. A brown booby circles, both beautiful and comical with her large, webbed feet dangling from her perfectly silhouetted form as she attempts to land. I watch her circle and reel, circle and reel against the play of light until a fine drizzle of rain forces me back into the shelter of the forest.

In the hush of undergrowth, white-eyes call and hop, given away by the flurry of their small, feathered wings. A red crab slowly lifts a branch of pale lichen to its mouth. Broad, brown rainbow fungi hold pools of water and fallen, rotting leaves. In all this green the world is luminous once again. I take out my new lens, attach it to my camera and begin to photograph pandanas that stand like strange, tall creatures, roots rendered as thin clusters of legs, hair spiking into the canopy above. I zoom in on the blue-pink forms of young robber crabs, photograph the red crab eating lichen until the crowd of mosquitos on my bare legs becomes unbearable and I retreat back to the car.

Finding no repellent in the car, I decide it's probably time to leave. I drive through the forest past the airport once again, where the robber crabs have now retreated from the day's heat into cool shade of the jungle. I drive back through Silver City, its buildings cascading down toward the view of the sea, down the long winding road cut into the island's cliff face to where Settlement perches on the

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Similarly, it is also imperative that I note here that I inhabit the contradictory position of being a beneficiary of past injustices, occupying a position of privilege that makes even writing this thesis in a university context possible. Theorists such as Michael Rothberg call for citizens such as myself to acknowledge that we are 'implicated subjects', people who 'occupy positions of power and privilege without being...direct agents of harm.' Rothberg argues such subjects, while not guilty of past wrongdoings, need to take responsibility for the way in which their actions and choices may perpetuate the wrongs of the past. This thesis is an act of resistance, a direct effort to take on the responsibility that Rothberg describes. It is written with a will to examine the colonial violence around me in order that I do not become complicit with these ongoing acts of oppression and injustice.

ocean's edge and pull into the driveway of my cottage. As I drive in, Chris, the cottage's owner, wanders over. Chris is a short, lean man in his thirties with an island tan. He seems both laid back and full of nervous energy as he chats to me on the cottage verandah, his face calm, open, body twitching with minor movements. He asks if I have everything I need. I say I do, except for the flat tyres on the bike, and we start talking about the wear and tear of salt and humidity, and end up sitting on the deck drinking tea watching a goshawk riding low over grass and layers of sprawling, pink-flowering vine. I am glad to have someone to talk to after my time alone. I ask Chris about the bathroom where, by the sink, the faded black characters of Japanese lettering painted on a muddy yellow backdrop have been carefully left, the clean pale blue of more recent paintwork framing and contrasting their stark forms.

'Yes, they're great, aren't they?' he replied. 'I asked someone once, I think they literally mean "rice" or "grain store", something like that. Nothing too profound. This place was built in the 1930s, probably a servant's quarters I am thinking, but when the Japanese invaded during the war they took it over and used it as a storeroom.'

From my subsequent research about the Japanese occupation of Christmas Island, I later discover that since the comparatively late beginning of this territory's known human history, Japan has never been a stranger to Christmas Island. Between 1918 and 1945, Japan purchased seventy-five to eighty percent of Christmas Island's phosphate. It is little wonder, then, that during World War Two, the Japanese considered Christmas Island an asset worth acquiring. On the twenty-ninth of February 1942, Japan attacked Christmas Island in an air raid that killed three men. Further bombings occurred during March, destroying military equipment and communications, and on the seventh of May 1942, troops began to arrive and the Japanese formally took control of the island.

The Japanese continued to occupy Christmas Island, using the islanders to make small amounts of phosphate, until their sudden and unexplained evacuation during December 1943. With exception of the lethal rape of a bedridden woman when troops first landed, it appears the reputed brutality of the Japanese soldiers did not hold true on Christmas Island. Perhaps the soldiers felt their vulnerability

too, in this strange and isolated world. The evacuation of the Japanese troops continued until June 1945, with the exception of fifteen soldiers who finally left on the twenty-fourth of August, curiously leaving the islanders with a year's supply of opium but little food.

As Chris and I chat looking out over the water, he tells me about other traces of Japanese occupation on the island: bottles, wash basins, lookouts and bomb stores, and as he does, I notice the cloud has begun to clear. I take our cups and tell Chris I am going to get moving while there is a window in the weather, as I am planning to head out to the Chinese cemetery.

'Good idea,' he says. 'In fact, it's a shame you weren't here last week. It was the twenty-fifth anniversary of Gordon Bennet's death—you know the big union guy?'

'Yes,' I say.

'Well they had a huge service and celebration last week, it was massive. He is still so important to the Chinese here—he basically saved them. That would have been an interesting thing to write about. Anyway, you will see all the offerings and flowers and everything on his grave when you get there.'

Chris wanders back to his house next door and I head inside and grab my backpack, remember to smear myself in repellent, and put on my sandals for the walk along the island's edge. As I head off, I see there is still dark cloud to the east, but I need to exercise, to get back into my body, so I take the risk anyway. Setting off, I soon remember how exercise always felt more laborious in the island's thick humidity and I begin to sweat. As I lived in Silver City near the top of Christmas Island, most of the friends I formed ended up being from that part of the island, so I had only ever driven through this end of Settlement. I love the slow pace that allows me to now take in the old, colonial architecture, the way the island is always trying to return its structures to the earth, covering walls in black mould, filling gutters with fernery. I wonder how old the thick-trunked frangipanis are, whether they started as new cuttings on a long boat trip from Asia, to find the island's rich soil in the 1930s. The old trees' canopies are covered with pale pink or white and yellow flowers, their petaled forms leaving a floral shower over yards of grass. As I get to the end of Settlement, I see in the distance a small, low-walled area sign-

posted 'European Graveyard.' I had never noticed this separate graveyard so close to Settlement before.

The sun has started to come out now, lighting up the Banyan trees on the road reserve and upping the humidity. The sea flashes bright on my left between trees. I stop and dig around in my bag for some protection, but realise I have not brought any sun cream, only a hat, as it seemed the threat of rain was more likely. I come around a curve in the road and, on my right, the terrain opens up where the jungle has been cleared and the concrete plinths and headstones of graves become visible. I cross the road and begin to look at the headstones, most of which I can't read as they are written in Chinese script. But I find pleasure in the red and black shapes of the Chinese characters, and am intrigued by the sight of fruit, incense, Scotch Finger biscuits, cans of soft drink and small cartons of juice left at different sites.

Christmas Island's population has been diverse from the outset and its rich cultural makeup continues to be one of the community's defining features. It is interesting to note that in the 2016 census, of the population of around one thousand eight hundred people, more than forty-three percent of Christmas Islanders are recorded as having both parents born outside of Australia, originating predominantly from Malaysia and China. More than fifty percent of households speak a language other than English at home. The main language groups are Malay and Mandarin, but they also include Cantonese, Min Nan (part of the Sino-Tibetan language family group, commonly known as Hokkien) and Tagalog (a Malayo-Polynesian language predominantly spoken in the Philippines). I savour the visual expression of this richness as I walk between headstones adorned with artful script, gradually making my way to the back of the graveyard to where the island's cliff begins to rise and booby birds fly pale-bodied and black-winged along the ridge. I am drawn to where a headstone is nestled beneath the canopy of a wide banyan tree. Here, the gravesite is almost an artwork, the concrete of the headstone the same colour as the tree's labyrinth of roots, both surfaces mottled and loved by lichen and mould. Both tree and monument reach north across the Java trench to Asia; it seems roots reach back differently here.

I keep walking until I arrive at the site of two enormous, white columns holding up a red setting sun back dropped by an ancient frangipani with a wide canopy of flowers. Two stairs lead up to a large, concrete platform, something more like a small courtyard than a grave. Inside this courtyard are two marble steps that lead up to a headstone covered in black Chinese characters. On the uppermost step, three jars hold large stubs of burnt incense sticks, while on the first step, a packet of Arnott's Orange Slice biscuits and three oranges are placed on separate plastic plates, and three Tetra packs of juice with their straws inserted are placed behind. I am standing at the site of the Coolies Memorial.

In his book *Suffering through Strength: the men who made Christmas Island*, Hunt tells us that in June 1899 (nine years after Christmas Island was annexed to the British Empire), a small ship was seen anchored off Christmas Island. The ship held, amongst other people, a group of one hundred and twenty Chinese men. The men were employed for pitifully low wages to do the back-breaking work of removing the island's rich phosphate stores by hand under an intense, tropical sun, and many were to die of beriberi, a disease discovered later to be the result of B1 deficiencies in the food supplied by their employers. Settlement cemetery was originally built in response to the large numbers of deaths of Chinese labourers at the old hospital, when the beriberi epidemic reached rampant proportions by 1901.

This original group of one hundred and twenty men were followed in time by many like them, men from poor villages in the provinces of Kwangtung (Guangdong), Kwangsi (Guangxi) and Fukien (Fujian) as well as Hainan. Hunt says:

> [The coolies] would live and die on this island. Many would never see their families and their home villages again. Some would be killed in accidents at work; some would be beaten to death; many would die horribly from disease. Others who survived lived in debt and poverty, unable to raise enough money to return to see their families and be buried with their ancestors in China.

The Coolies Memorial, erected by the Chinese Literary Association with the assistance of the Christmas Island Phosphate Commission in 1971, seeks to acknowledge the hardship endured by the Chinese indentured labourers and

counter the erasure of their lives from the landscape. 'This memorial,' the headstone reads, 'honours our Chinese ancestors and late friends, and commemorates their story of endurance and courage, written with their blood, sweat and tears. Lest we forget.'

Perhaps it is the backdrop of the ancient frangipani radiant with blossom speaking to the abundance of white marble, or perhaps it is the evocation of hope in the rising sun held high on its columns, but despite the incredible suffering the site represents, the space feels distinctly peaceful and light. I linger a moment longer, taking in the memorial's grand design, then continue weaving my way through the cemetery grounds.

Some headstones are small and old, marked only by a simple plinth of concrete or the strategic placement of a red brick. Others are grand, containing glossy enamelled photographs, guarded by ornate statues or decorated tiles. I cross the road, back toward the ocean, feeling the sun beginning to beat on my winter-pale skin, hot on my shoulders. I walk to where a thin strip of sloping ground between the asphalt and the ocean contains a stand of seemingly younger frangipanis and a series of what I recognise from my time on the Cocos Islands to be Islamic graves. The graves are a rectangular border of concrete laid at the foot of the trees, without script of any kind. Instead they consist of two stone markers, one at the head and one at the feet of where the deceased lies. Over the graves, the trees have scattered handful upon handful of blossoms, so it almost seems that the trees bless the deceased, honour the company that they keep.

When I reach Gordon Bennett's grave, the site is unmistakable. A large, green octagonal roof decorated with botanical sculptures is held up by eight red-tiled pillars to form an expansive pagoda. Two steps lead me up to a red concrete floor where, off to the side, two ornate concrete tables are surrounded by similarly decorated concrete stools.

At the centre of the pagoda is a high, marble plinth at the base of which has been set bunches of flowers in two ceramic jars as well as a large terracotta pot filled with sand. Inserted in the sand are scores of incense sticks and skewered, burnt cigarettes. Surrounding the pots and vases are bottles of water and rice crackers scattered on a plate and in containers on the floor. On the first level of the

marble plinth is a can of beer, what looks like juice or spirits in a paper cup as well as cups of what appears to be water. On the second level, a lotus-shaped candle sits in a green, glass saucer. Next to this is a lighter, a plastic dish piled with an assortment of lollipops, an orange and an apple.

On top of the marble grave is the headstone that contains both English and Chinese, as well as an embedded framed photo of Bennett—the image of an open-faced and attractive young man, bright-eyed, with well-defined features. Playfulness exudes from a half-formed smile, forming two dimples either side of an otherwise smooth-skinned face.

Gordon Bennett, or Tai Ko Seng (Successful Big Brother) as he is known to the Chinese population on Christmas Island, has an almost god-like status on the island. Watching archival footage of Bennett's interactions with the Chinese population, and more recent footage from the ongoing memorials of the anniversaries of his death during July each year, it is hard not to be moved by the deep affection and dedication between this idiosyncratic and somewhat unlikely leader and the Chinese community.

Born in 1944, Bennett was a hard-drinking, chain-smoking Englishman who dropped out of school at the age of fifteen. Bennett's father was a coal miner and union general secretary in the UK, and I can't help but wonder if that early influence was what led Bennett to take up his position in Australia as general secretary of Western Australia's Watersupply Union after his arrival in 1971. It was this position that led directly to his appointment as secretary of the Union of Christmas Island Workers (UCIW), a newly formed collective born from uprisings over poor work and living conditions, as well as the excessive powers of the British Phosphate Commission (BPC). Self-assured, witty and charismatic, with a genuine interest in the rich culture of the Chinese, Bennett quickly won over the members of the union as well as the larger Chinese community. With the support of local workers, Bennett took on the formidable role of challenging the seemingly untouchable phosphate company.

The British Phosphate Commission (BPC) began running the Christmas Island phosphate mine after George Clunies-Ross and Sir John Murray, the original lease holders, sold the company to Australia and New Zealand after the Second World

War. Before the rise of the union movement on Christmas Island, BPC was responsible for what were described as third-world conditions for mine workers on the island. On top of the poor living conditions, the BPC were responsible for forced repatriation, withholding of wages and barring re-entry as punitive measures used against men employed on the mine, while paying workers around one quarter of the wages of Australian employees on the mainland.[5] A plaque at the site of the UCIW's original office records Bennett's legacy as the 'Elimination of colonialism, elimination of racism, wage parity with mainland Australia, Migration Act (Australian citizenship), permanent residence status for Christmas Island, mine re-opening in 1990 and fair housing allocation.'

Bennet was also responsible for helping to form the Phosphate Resources Limited (PRL), a mining company formed by the Chinese community when, after the union's successful (and sometimes aggressive) negotiations of wages and conditions with the Australian Government, the Labor Party controversially shut down the mine in the 1980s. Bennett became Shire president and PRL chairman, but ultimately the weight of his responsibilities, as well as his heavy drinking and smoking, contributed to a massive heart attack on the thirtieth of July, 1991, a year after the mine was re-opened. Bennet was forty-seven when he died.

Ancestor worship and offerings steeped with symbolism are not unusual on Christmas Island, but this expansive pagoda is an enormous and heartfelt tribute to an equally big personality, a man not only loved, but remembered in ritual acts of worship by many on the island. At the bottom of the marble headstone that stands at the centre of the pagoda is a wreath and bunches of flowers, bougainvillea and palm, crisp after days of sun. 'You lived life to the fullest, my love,' the headstone reads, 'and changed the lives of so many people through your staunch belief in justice, equality and truth and your complete unselfishness.' A laminated poster amongst the flowers reads, 'Twenty-five years on, and forever in our hearts.' As I leave Bennett's memorial, I can imagine the large gathering of Chinese Christmas

[5] BPC paid a rate of fifty-five dollars a week in the 1970s. Reserve Bank statistics tell us the average weekly wage for a male in 1975 was one hundred and fifty-eight dollars a week, while by 1978 the average weekly wage was two hundred and ten dollars a week.

Islanders filling this space, spilling out over the grass, lighting candles and placing the incense sticks I can see in the sand, burning Bennett a few Winfield Blues.

The monument is raised on the edges of a small slope, where an ocean breeze catches my hair as I make my way back down the steps, the sea a restless, luminous canvas glimpsed through thick greenery on the other side of the road. As I continue walking through the last of the headstones, I can't help but consider the elements of Feng Shui with which the Chinese community designed the memorial space. As many of the Chinese labourers did not have the means to have their bodies expatriated back to their home country, features of the cemetery site were designed to perform a symbolic role, metaphorically bridging the deceased through movements of birds and invitation of water back to their homeland. Birds reel, move incessantly, leaving and returning, as the ocean extends azure and shimmering toward the horizon. I watch, my mind stepping up and out, feeling this pull, an almost tactile thread, this layered and dynamic path across the sea.

I continue walking past the graveyard, wondering how far it is to the Grotto, one of the island's dramatic sea caves. I know it can't be far from here. Dark clouds begin to form, coming in from the south. They move toward me, low and foreboding, rendered striking by the sky's high backdrop of blue. To my left, obscuring the ocean, is a tall stand of pandanas. The repeated shapes of the plants' stark lines seem sculptural against the sky's brilliant backdrop. I stop and get out my camera as brown boobies and Christmas Island frigatebirds glide into the scene.

Christmas Island frigatebirds are endemic to the island and are the rarest species of frigatebirds in the world. The site where I stand is one of only three nesting sites on the island, and with a population of only one thousand two hundred breeding pairs, the species is vulnerable to extinction. I try to capture these unique creatures as they come over the sculpted foliage, set against the layered cloudscape, but can't quite get the shot I want. The sky becomes increasingly dark as a wide front eats all traces of blue. Within minutes the place where I am standing is utterly transformed.

Dark clouds erase the light, and the island's cliffs to my right become silhouetted, the layers of foliage at their feet obscured by shadow. First ten, then fifty, then what appears to be hundreds of Frigatebirds begin to soar along the ridge

like dark spirits gathering, colluding, haunting the land. The birds soar up, up, high into the wind and almost disappear, circling and wheeling, their strange, arrowed shapes dark against grey. Then, just when I think they have gone, behind me first a few birds, then ten, twenty, thirty, fifty birds flow along the ridge line once again, silent and foreboding, once more climbing up, up into the troubled sky.

The front has moved in now, so I put my raincoat on and stand in fine drizzle at the side of the road staring up at the island's cliffs. Watching the performance, I realise the moment feels ritualised, an enactment of an ancient dance shared between birds, cliff and cloud, instigated by a shift in wind. I feel completely irrelevant, yet not excluded. Despite the road and signposts, the place feels wild and untamed, loaded with latent power, and I stand damp and unmoving, hair pasted in wet stripes across my cheeks and forehead, completely exhilarated.

I don't know how long I have been standing watching the birds, but as their numbers eventually dwindle my attention begins to waiver. I suddenly realise my hair and shoes are sodden and I decide it is time to keep moving. I have been walking for well over an hour now and realise I am also going to have to walk back. I wonder how much further it is until I reach the cave. I start to feel each step on the long narrow stretch, walking south along the island. Soon I hear sounds from the golf course and know it can't be far. Finally, I glimpse the sign for the Grotto, faded and tucked behind foliage, hear the hiss of that breathy dragon that, in stories still told, is fabled to live beneath the sea.

As I walk in along the path, red crabs scuttle sideways over a yellow-brown carpet of wet, fallen leaves. The smell of jungle rises up, greets me like a rush of joy, and I step smiling toward the open mouth of sibilating rock. And there it is, even more beautiful than I remember—a luminous, liquid, aquamarine jewel set into the floor of this small limestone cave. There is a slight sense of menace as the trapped air is forced out with each surge of tide in a breathy rush. The pale blue light that reflects up from the white sand at the bottom of the cave illuminates the fat stalactites suspended from the Grotto's rocky roof. A parrot fish scopes the cave floor for food, soaked in light. Yet the cave's beauty is shockingly undermined by a grimy rim of rubbish that has been forced up and onto the rocks at the Grotto's entrance with the surge of tide. Twenty or thirty faded thongs lie scattered over the

rocky entryway, interspersed with plastic water bottles and broken pieces of Styrofoam. One large piece of foam lies trapped in the water of the cave, moving up and rushing back beside the parrot fish with each rush of tide.

It is confronting to have beauty and ugliness juxtaposed so starkly. Despite the three years I spent coming and going from Christmas Island, I have never seen the Grotto littered like this and, after watching the fish move through the jewelled light for several moments, I decide to leave. The rain has brought out many more red crabs, the numbers so large they now cover the forest floor as they feed on the wet, softened leaves. I bend to watch one crab with a particularly bright leaf lift small yellow sections to her mouth. She goes to scurry away, but when I stop, so does she, and she lets me watch her deliberate movements – cut of claw, bright detritus raised, red pincer to slit of mouth. Time has slowed, there is no hurry, and I am tired from the long walk. I become aware of a low, soft soundscape, scuttle and snip, lift of leaf to a crowd of mouths. I stay like that for a while, crouching low, watching this glistening array of creatures eat through their day. And they watch me until they grow bored and return their attention to their tasks.

I am reluctant to leave the crabs when I stand to go, sad to leave the bright layering of red lives amongst the yellow and brown scattered foliage, but I am starting to get hungry myself. Soon I am moving back amongst the graves, the world wet, sun again beating hard against my skin. Back in the Chinese cemetery, I glimpse a stark marble headstone engraved and painted with bold red characters. Against this, two enormous yellow grasshoppers mate, and it strikes me as something of a portrait of this place, how the island seems to hold you hard up against it, life and death, virility and decay, brazen with colour, filled with creatures from many countries, all of us finding ourselves washed up here one way or another.

3

Our Tenuous Place

Back at the cottage, I eat lunch watching the silver bosunbirds tumble, listen to their screechy repartee as they roll in impossible backward somersaults, head always upright but bodies spinning back and around like small Ferris wheels, trailing their one long plume elegantly behind them. Afterward I strip back to my underwear and flop onto the double bed, turning on the aircon for a break from the humidity. The small cabin cools quickly, and I lean over to the bookshelf embedded in the cottage's wall and flick though a series of books about the island's history.

Black and white photos show stiff portraits of white men in plinth helmets, children buttoned into sailor suits and grim images of coolies working the exposed phosphate mines. I consider how when I lived here in 2011, with the exception of a handful of staff at the school where I worked, I barely got to know any members of the island's largely Chinese population. However, I was consistently humbled by the generosity of the Chinese community, by the street festivals, dragon dances and cultural celebrations they regularly organised. I could see it was their warm invitations to these events, their willingness to feed the entire Island, even filling large eskies with soft drink and beer that brought together the diverse groups of people living here, linking the largely transient, white population with the more enduring members of the community.

I remember the energy the festivals routinely brought to the otherwise quiet streets, with drumming and cymbals, ritual and singing, and the bright, hypnotic dances of the dazzling, red dragons, often brought over especially from China. In particular, I remember my first Chinese New Year. A recent arrival, I was in awe of my new home, its complexity and beauty, its peace and rugged geography, every day unearthing some new layer. Four weeks after we landed, we were invited up to a large feast near the top of the island, at the old suburb of Drumsite. As we joined the crowd it took me a while to believe we could help ourselves to whatever we

liked, rice dishes and satays, pork crackers and noodles. The sense of abundance on an island where a lettuce alone could cost twelve or thirteen dollars, was striking.

After dinner we stepped out onto the street where a long dragon twisted and convulsed as muscled young men drummed and cymbals clashed in high pitches. All along the street were the crumpled shapes of enormous paper lanterns. People formed small groups, together holding up each lantern's form, crouching to light the candle at its base. The lanterns lit up with a tungsten glow that spread its warm light onto the crowd's faces. Then, as gas was created by the candle's heat, the lanterns began to slowly lift like floating, golden wishes. Gently they rocked, lifting high, high into the deep black of the night sky, until the space above our heads was filled with a soft strata of light.

I close the book, too tired to really take in more than photos, and rest for a while in the cabin's cool air. Being back on the island has filled me with an enormous sense of peace and exhilaration. I doze, drifting in and out of sleep, washed with memories, steeped in happiness. When I wake, the day is getting late, and I move to the window, where the silver bosunbirds still throw up their strange ceaseless sounds, still rolling in tight circles of flight. I grab my towel and head to the bathroom for a shower, glancing again the faded Japanese lettering above the sink.

It is when I start to take off my bra, and the scrape of strap sends a searing pain across the surface of my skin, that I realise I am seriously burnt. Coming straight from the end of a long Perth winter, my skin is pale, has not developed any form of resistance to the emphatic, tropical sun. As I get into the shower, I turn up the cold so my limbs do not ring with pain. When I get out, I slather myself in moisturiser, feeling sheepish that at forty-something I still managed to do so much damage to myself. It is my shoulders that are the worst, a deep, dark red, and I wince at the sensation of cold cream on my radiant skin.

I turn in front of a small mirror on the back of the bathroom door to assess the damage on one shoulder and then turn to examine the other. It is then that I see it, and with a jolt, turn my shoulder back in the mirror's frame again. Two moles on the edge of my shoulder are not only completely burnt, but somehow over the winter months, I had not seen that the small dots have changed and grown, so that

what was once two separate dark marks, has completely morphed into one dark and irregularly shaped mass. I feel a sick sensation in my stomach.

I turn away from the mirror a little dazed and finish getting dressed, then turn my shoulder back to the mirror hoping to reassure myself that it is not that bad. But it is, everything tells me the marks on my shoulder look very, very wrong, and it is all I can do to stop the rising sense of panic in my chest. Suddenly all the wonder of my adventure leaves and I feel frightened and incredibly alone. I make myself dinner and sit out on the deck as the sun sets. The silver bosuns have gone now, and I am left with a pale haze of sunset over sea. I eat mechanically, then do the dishes, rifle through the tourist information looking for the number for the hospital. I find it and put it aside to ring to see a doctor in the morning. I call Ash but can’t bear to say a thing, only tell my husband about my walk through the graveyard and the wheeling silver bosuns and, after I hang up, again look at my shoulder in the mirror, my fears unrelieved. I go to bed, cannot sleep, toss and turn until dawn’s light creeps in through the timber blinds.

In the morning I ring the hospital as early as I can. They cannot fit me in until four-thirty the following day. My heart sinks, such an unbearably long time before I can put my mind at ease. I go for a walk, heading south along the island’s edge. The morning is hazy, there is no glow of wonder for me today. I feel a sudden rush of resentment and anger, find I cannot muster the will or energy to push the sensation down. *What is wrong with this place*, I think. *Why does it seem to want to force people hard up against suffering and mortality, against the tenuous fact of our lives?* Five years ago, when I lived here, I arrived in a community struggling to come to terms with the drownings from the Christmas Island boat tragedy, Australia’s worst maritime disaster in more than a century. Several months later, my father was diagnosed with terminal cancer. He visited me here, his body a hollow shell of itself, his masculinity eroded, his confidence shattered. I begin to cry. I am desperately trying not to leap to conclusions but cannot force my feelings of fear and dismay to go away. I am here on this island abuzz with ideas, with so much unfinished work left to do. My daughter has already lost two grandfathers and an uncle. I don’t want her to suffer anymore. I want to continue to share life with her, I want to live.

The tears are coming heavy now, I cannot find courage or perspective, I feel dark and scared and unable to overcome what the strange shape on my shoulder seems to be suggesting. I reach the grassed area past the police station walking toward the cove, where I can walk along the edge of the water, by small sea cliffs. The sea jostles restlessly against the jagged rock. In the waters of Flying Fish Cove, I can see an enormous, blue ship has attached to the anchor buoys. Suddenly, in moment so vivid and raw it transcends all cliché, a rainbow appears, its bright arc rising higher than the cove's sheer cliffs, spreading curved colour from one side of the bay to the other. A choked cry rises up from my chest. I am washed with an enormous and unexpected sense of peace and acceptance. I take a breath, wipe my eyes, take it in, turn around and walk back toward my makeshift home.

4

Suspension

That afternoon, my friend Yvonne arrives. I am very grateful for a familiar face after my rough night's sleep, and even happier that she is willing to go for a dive. Yvonne is slightly younger than me, in her late thirties, though about as short, with a tumble of golden-blonde curls that fall to her shoulders. The work that brought me to Christmas Island five years earlier was a contract teaching asylum seekers for twelve months in 2011. Yvonne worked as an assistant with the asylum seeker students in the family detention centre at Phosphate Hill during that time. She consistently embraced the students with her warmth and generosity, as well as her wide smile and thick Afrikaans accent. As I get into her car, I feel there is a softness in the way that she relates to me, an unspoken understanding about why I am here, why I need to return. Though the reason for the need to come back to this complex island-mountain is still very much a question, I intuitively know it has something to do with the unsettling impact of what we both witnessed behind the wire, as well as the traces and memories of the young people whose lives momentarily came into our own.

Once at Flying Fish Cove, we put on our snorkelling gear quickly as Yvonne has two small children and a limited window of time. There was so much to talk about on the short drive, and we continue to chat away as we get out of our clothes and step into the water, but our catch-up is cut short as we both bite on our snorkels and slip into the deliciously warm sea. As we set off, I can see that the coral has died back on the shallow reef and the soft corals I remember swaying luxuriously from the small limestone burrs are gone. Suddenly a white-tip reef shark appears in the metre of water in which we moving along at the reef's edge. The grey creature is large for a reef shark, looks at us briefly with her black circle of eye, then, with a sudden whip of her tail, moves past us in a spurt, disappearing into blue.

Yvonne waits for me and checks I am okay, knowing I am scared of sharks, but her confidence gives me courage and together we swim on, moving into deeper water, where the wide aquarium I remember opens to me and a wellspring of happiness and gratitude rises in my chest. All around me is the impossible sapphire-blue water that only becomes more striking as I look out into the deep. Below this, large plate corals stretch their thin structures, metres wide, beneath which the head of a moray eel rises like a bobbing periscope. Leatherjackets are suspended near the surface fragmenting the sun's rays, the blue canopy of water rendering them more flock than school. A giant trevally flashes silver from the reef behind us. We swim out deeper now, floating over a dreamscape, a wide, undulating terrain of layered corals, world hushed by the water in our ears.

Suddenly the reef drops away, and there is a sheer drop into blue, the wall of rock disappearing into watery darkness. This cliff here is three kilometres straight down to the ocean floor. I float, suspended, over this seemingly never-ending edge, briefly washed with vertigo and an irrational sense that I could fall. Clouds of bright neon fish flash at the reef's edge, ornate corals offer their colours to the light. Another white-tipped reef shark comes along the edge of the drop-off, moving from the deep's darkness and into light. It is only a small shark, slim and shorter than my own body, so I will myself to be resilient as she begins arcing her sleek, streamlined form, circling something on the reef directly below me. Next to the shark, a neon-yellow coral half the size of the shark itself is lit by the lowering sun. Around the coral, tiny fishes swarm, glinting and disappearing as their bodies turn in the sun. In all this colour and light, the smooth movements of the shark are not ominous but instead gift me a lens through which to witness her exquisite grace. Mesmerised, I watch her strong body turning in contracting circles, stage-lit, until her interest wanes and she begins to glide low over the reef, disappearing into the shadow of the headland.

I am relieved there is no-one that I recognise in the foyer the following afternoon when I arrive at the hospital. A young couple sit holding their son, the woman's olive face framed by her patterned headscarf, the man in a t-shirt and sarong. The child climbs their legs, wriggles around and then slides back down the

line of their limbs. An old man with a goatee and a thin, high-cheekboned face sits silently by the window. I hear my name called and I get up, follow the tall, young doctor who is already making his way back down the hall. He shows me into a bright, clean room and asks how he can help. I explain about the changes in the moles on my shoulder and he takes out a kind of magnifying glass and asks if he can have a look.

I turn my shoulder toward him and pull back on my tank top and he looks at my skin in silence.

'Well it ticks all the boxes,' he says. 'I think the best thing we can do is to take a biopsy now. We can send the sample out on the next flight, when is that, Tuesday? Oh, today. We won't make today's flight; I think we can send the sample off on Saturday.'

'How long will it take to find out?' I ask, containing the sinking feeling this man is not going to abate my fears.

'Oh, say it goes out Saturday, then a few days to get there, a few days in the lab, how long are you on the island?'

'Until next Tuesday,' I say, 'then I am heading to Cocos for a week.'

'Oh well, why don't you get the nurses on Cocos to give us a ring once you are there? I imagine we will know by then.'

I am taken through to a surgery room where I am asked to remove my top. I wince realising I am wearing a beige bra, suddenly feeling much older than this pale, bearded, young doctor. A male assistant comes in; they shine a lamp on my body, give me a needle and remove a small part of my shoulder. The doctor stitches the hole together with what looks like thin fishing wire.

'No swimming for three to four days,' the doctor says cheerily, 'then come back on Saturday and a nurse will take the stiches out.' The male nurse dresses the wound with a large adhesive bandage and I am ushered toward the door. Before I even make the waiting room, the doctor is asking the nurse where a good place to go swimming is on the island, and the men stand beneath the foyer's map pointing at different bays.

'Goodbye,' I say, but they barely glance over their shoulders.

I only have seven days left on this stunning, tropical island, and the doctor has told me for four of those I cannot swim. I drive back down the island's slopes feeling flat, trying not to be angry, craving the people I love three thousand kilometres away.

5

Remembering

The following day I decide I have to rise above my flatness and fears. I drive out to the cove and decide to walk up the steep road to Taj Jin house to look at the memorials and sit out at the fuel buoys. At this site is one of most moving memorials I have seen—the memorial to SIEV X. I park at Flying Fish Cove and wander toward the water. At the west end of the cove is a smaller bay with a beautiful outlook over several small, rocky islands that rise up from the reef. The rocks are shaped like angular oblongs placed lengthwise on the water, their small peaks occasionally decorated with one or two bonsai-like trees, making me think of sea temples in Indonesia or Japan. Today I can see an Abbott's booby has chosen the nearest island as a nesting site, and her bright, white baby, as big as a hen and fluffy as child's toy, rises comically and blue-faced as I near the water.

Christmas Island's topography is consistently dramatic, and often feels harsh, even violent, but at this bay there is a gentle sigh of sea, and the rainforest tumbles lush and soft down cliffs toward the water. Last time I sat here, I was with a large group of asylum seeker boys and young men. I remember one boy in particular who had arrived on his own, only fourteen years of age, from Iran. This student was loved by everyone who met him, he was so open and warm, so alive in his young skin, that the older boys happily befriended him, the staff took him under their wing. I remember taking the students up to the lookout at Territory Day Park. The young men looked down in silence at the jetty where they had first arrived on Christmas Island, escorted from their old, wooden boats by the Navy. It is here the students must have begun to realise they had survived their dangerous journeys, finally making that first footfall onto land.

From the lookout, the students, teachers and I had then gone out to the Grotto and watched the water dance in the limestone cave, then come back to this beach to eat our lunch. Some of the teenage boys sat with their arms around each other's necks, most were quiet, others had lost their ability to smile. I watched

them eating their lunch in the shade, looking as ordinary as any bunch of boys, and was completely confronted by their sheer humanity seeing them out the detention centre, realising I was the one who had to put them back in to what, despite the euphemisms, for all intents and purposes was a prison.

When they finished their meals, the boys asked if I would take their photos, and they posed on the edge of reef, in front of the angular shapes of islands, playful now, sunglasses pressed against their faces, scarves flicked with a flourish around necks. I have a photo of two best friends, young men framed in a portrait, faces soft, eyes full of tenderness. Afterwards, one of the young men came to me and placed a small gift of coral in my hand. I no longer know his name, don't know where he went, but the sculpted fragment of coral sits on my dressing table, each morning urging me not to forget.

I begin my ascent up the thin, asphalt road that climbs the steep slope up Taj Jin House and beyond that to Smith Point. As the canopy closes over me the smell of damp leaves rises up all around. I can hear the creaking calls of booby birds in the distance, and sea glints in blue on my right through a fine, dark filigree of leaves. On my left, large boulders protrude toward the road, around the base of which runs small rivulets of water in which red crabs gather.

I have begun to sweat already, but all this huff and puff gets me out of my head and back into my senses, nerve endings alive to the living world around me. As I reach the top and step out into the light, Taj Jin House, an expansive two-storey colonial residence framed by white pillars and wide verandahs, sits like a forgotten world in front of me. Meaning 'big boss' in the Chinese Hokkien dialect, Taj Jin House was originally built for Christmas Island's resident magistrate, and later the British administrator, whose role was to do whatever was required to retain order in this remote outpost, as Tierney notes:

> In a single day [the British-appointed district officer] might act as a judge, port officer, post agent and health officer. They were also saddled with the unlikely duties of the sale of opium, as well as having to be the ultimate tactician, handling various cliques and factions within residential groups.

Taj Jin House now houses a fascinating museum that documents Christmas Island's history and is used for special occasions, such as the island's annual ball, as well as the occasional class of Tai Chi.

As I stand at the top of the hill, to my right, near where the island's limestone cliff drops dramatically away to views of the sea, are the asylum seeker memorials, tucked into a thin strip of grass between the road and cliff. I am not ready to look at them just yet, so I keep moving past Taj Jin House, past the World War Two guns mounted at the top of the hill. I round the point and walk beneath the cool shade of banyan trees hanging their fibrous threads luxuriously over the road. After about fifteen minutes I can see the gate to the water treatment plant and take the limestone track surrounded by thick, green clouds of fleshy beach cabbage down to the cliff looking over the fuel buoys.

On this small, singular Island, it was at this cliff, hanging somewhat perilously over the surging water, that I could almost always find a way to be alone. The water here is implausibly blue. On its surface floats a single, yellow cabbage leaf, the scene Photoshop-bright, larger than life. Suspended over the water runs a rusted chain as thick as my thigh that disappears into the blue, running out to secure the fuel buoys. The light is incredible. The buoys are lit bright, sun painting them like giant, coloured toy drums, yellow and red, patterned by salt and seams of rust.

On the yellow surface of the gently rocking buoy are dotted the dark, grey forms of common noddies. The birds land, sway with the buoy looking slightly non-plussed, then take off, fly in circles and land again. Along the rusted chain, a string of noddies also rest and preen, tucking their light grey heads into the darker, downy pillow of their bodies.

I crouch down and shuffle out as close to the edge of the cliff as I dare. Looking down into the brilliant colour of the water, I watch a lone red fish get washed in and out as it tries to feed on coral while the water surges and rushes around the rocks. Booby birds fly in and out, watching their nests. From here I can follow the shape of the next bay around to West White beach, trace a line with my eyes back up the steep slope, know behind that ridge, hidden by jungle, is the notorious North West Point Detention Centre. I remember looking out over this

same ridge from my home the day of the detention centre riots, alerted by the city-sound of sirens, to see the crest of the hill ablaze.

It is so quiet here today. I am wearing my bikini, so I remove my t-shirt, feeling the sun, the soft breeze on my skin. The noddies on the chain and I watch each other, both sitting with our different reasons for staying, while the water rushes in and out of rock. I watch the red fish sway and feed in the surge, the yellow leaf on its blue bed, the noddies dozing peacefully in the sun. Suddenly, silently, from behind the point, comes the dark, angular shape of a Border Force vessel. It jolts me as it glides into view without a sound. I feel exposed, on display, sitting out on the cliff. I hastily dress, push back my anger and begin to pack my things, turn back for one more glimpse at the buoy, its form painterly and beautiful in light, then move quickly back up the track and away from the possibility of watching eyes.

It is drizzling a little now, and the banyan trees create a welcome canopy as I make my way back toward Taj Jin house. Soon I step out of shade and into pale light. The rain has eased but Flying Fish Cove remains muted and dull beneath thick, grey sky. Walking toward the point, I first arrive at the memorial of the lost sailor, Leading Seaman Cameron Troy Curr. The details of his death are laid out in bronze and set into a plinth of rock in front of the commanding building of Taj Jin House, beside a flagpole where island state ceremonies take place, surrounded by a memorial wall erected by the Second Combat Engineer Regiment. In the rock below his plaque is the photo of an almost child-like young man with pale skin, looking directly at the camera with a half-smile in his sailor's uniform and hat. I look at the war memorabilia – a large steel anchor, the end of a grey painted canon or enormous gun. Out on the water I can see the Border Force ship turning back out to sea.

I walk along the grass at the edge of the cliff, back toward Flying Fish Cove, where the lawn becomes a thin strip of about two metres between the road and the cliff's edge, interspersed with trees and signage. It is here I find the crude, concrete slab in the rectangular the shape of a grave, in which is set a badly damaged rudder. The front of the concrete slab has been softened with a smatter of smooth, coral rocks, over which cooch grass sends out ragged tendrils trying to get a foothold. Set amongst the pebbles is a small, bronze plaque that reads:

SIEV 221

15 December 2010

We reflect on this day with sadness

The loss of each person's life diminishes our own

because we are all part of humankind.

AS YOU READ THIS PLEASE REMEMBER ALL

ASYLUM SEEKERS WHO HAVE ATTEMPTED

THIS TREACHEROUS JOURNEY

The first time I saw this monument, despite the touching epigraph, it struck me as incredibly odd, and standing here again on the island, I feel this dis-ease once again. I remember contacting the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet to find out if any asylum seekers had been consulted about the form of the memorial. No one ever responded to my calls or emails. I find it hard to imagine the families of the deceased sitting comfortably with a memorial that falls short of clearly stating that anyone had died, let alone its striking failure to the mention the number of men, women and children whose lives were lost, as well as the events that had led to their terrible deaths. The sinking of the SIEV 221 on the fifteenth of December 2010, saw the violent drowning of fifty people including fifteen children, as their struggling fishing boat was smashed against the island's jagged cliffs. It was a disaster that sent shockwaves across the world[6], yet the tragedy's vague memorial is placed by a kerb next to a road alongside street signage beneath a tree. The site of the 221 memorial is so obscure, that even tourists looking for the memorial (having heard about it only through word of mouth) have been unable to find it, a site more like a traffic island than a place for grieving and reflection.

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[6] For more information on the sinking of the SIEV 221 as well as examples of how the boat tragedy was reported at the time, see reports in The Australian: https://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/dozens-feared-dead-in-christmas-island-asylum-seeker-boat-crash/news-story/102bf9d6c576edec6d7395c885074020
and New York Times: https://www.nytimes.com/2010/12/16/world/asia/16australia.html.

I can't help but compare the ambiguity and invisibility of the SIEV 221 memorial with that of Leading Seaman Cameron Troy Curr. The site of the young man's monument is in context, set amongst its various military signifiers in a place designated for ceremony and memorialisation with its flagpole, sweeping views out to sea on one side, back dropped by the historically significant and architecturally grand Taj Jin House on the other. I consider what we learn about Cameron Troy Curr through his memorial—what he looks like, his date of birth and death (1981–2002), his position in the Navy, the ship he was on, where he went missing, the search for his body, the loss to his family and a little about his character. Yet at this site in front of me commemorating the deaths of so many Iraqi and Iranian people, the details remain hidden, obscured, the monument shockingly functional and bland.

A week before my flight to the islands, I met Christmas Island Shire President and General Secretary of the Union of Christmas Island Workers, Gordon Thompson, while he was in Perth for a conference. A big man with an even bigger personality, Gordon is held in somewhat polarised regard on Christmas Island, but I have a huge amount of respect for his courage and outspoken stance, advocating for the rights of asylum seekers on and off the island. Though it was winter, we sat outside at a riverside cafe as he lit his cigarette in the non-smoking courtyard and told me about the books he was reading, his background, and the history of unionism in the Indian Ocean Territories. After some time, I began to ask him about his experience of asylum seekers on Christmas Island. I asked if it was true that locals threatened to burn down the memorial of the SIEV 221 were it to be built at the site of the tragedy, a place of low sea cliffs in the middle of Settlement, outside the Golden Bosun bar.

'That's correct,' Gordon told me, 'so we ended up with that propeller, that bent propeller, in a concrete plinth in an isolated place by Taj Jin House, where no one can ever move or destroy it.'

I move on to the small monument that has drawn me here—the SIEV X memorial, a simple affair initiated and lovingly constructed by local Christmas Islanders. The SIEV X memorial was made to honour the lives of the three hundred and fifty-three men, women and children who drowned in International Waters on their way from Indonesia to Christmas Island on the ninth of October 2001.

Somewhat troublingly, despite the moving and personal way in which the massive loss of life is commemorated the SIEV X memorial is located even further toward the bushes at the side of the road, situated by a traffic light, behind which the cliff face rises up, plants spilling down its surface, and the jungle begins to take over the space once again. But before I even reach the monument's base, I can see something is wrong, terribly wrong. For instead of the scene I remember, with hundreds of rocks inscribed with the names of those who drowned, the concrete base of the monument lies exposed, with a scattering of pebbles lying on the surface interspersed with rotten, fallen leaves. A sick feeling rises in my stomach. Where have the rocks gone? How do scores of weighty, coral pebbles simply up and disappear?

Yet the plinth with plaque at the centre remains. It reads:

SIEV X
19th of OCTOBER, 2001
In memory of the 146 children,
142 women and 65 men who drowned on
their way to Christmas Island in search
of a better life.

AS YOU READ THIS PLEASE REMEMBER ALL ASYLUM SEEKERS
WHO HAVE ATTEMPTED THIS TREACHEROUS JOURNEY.

I am touched as I realise for the first time that the two asylum seeker monuments speak to each other; the epitaph of the SIEV 221 has been made to echo that of the SIEV X. At least this hidden plaque gives us some information. But the absence of rocks disturbs me, I look around, hoping they were just scattered by a whipper snipper, and perhaps lying by the fence or along the road, but the inscribed pebbles are nowhere to be seen. I begin to remove the rotten leaves and twigs between the remaining rocks, and suddenly feel watched, look around, but there is no one there. I walk to the garden and the back of Taj Jin House and pick bright blooms of bougainvillea and leaves of red and yellow croton plants and take

them back, tuck them under the remaining stones. I walk back down the hill feeling heavy, the sky still dark. The ocean no longer winks between the trees.

6

Pete Parts the Wild Horse's Mane

After my day visiting the memorial sites, I need some lightness, some company. When Jo picked me up from the airport earlier that week, as I sat gazing silent and wide-eyed out of the window, Pete and Jo had chatted about the Tai Chi classes that Pete runs on Wednesday nights at the Community Hall in Poon San. I decide this could be just what I need, and around six in the evening I get in the little car Pete has lent me and I drive up the steep slope into the heart of the island's Asian community to join his class. The sun, having just set, casts the Poon San flats as an enormous, rectangular silhouette. I notice all the satellite dishes, by day inconspicuous are now sharply defined, a black crowd of futuristic creatures perched silently on the apartment's form.

I find myself wishing I had bought my camera as I step into the hall where the walls are washed with light, saturated by a radiant orange hue, as the setting sun drops like a rounded ember into a curve of darkening sea. Once inside, the directional light makes the stark hall seem cinematic, its open doors framing a spectacular view over Poon San and the ocean beyond.

'Renee!' Pete says, 'How are you going? I have meant to call but it has been busy since I have been back on the island, you know what it's like when you have been away…' Pete laughs.

'I do!' I say, imagining Pete having to scrub the mould that seems to make itself at home on the walls of peoples' houses the moment they step onto the plane. I tell Pete my work is going well, about my trips to the cemetery and memorials, and we tee up a time for me to interview him the next day.

'I am a bit nervous,' he laughs, 'what if I don't say anything important?'

'You don't have to,' I reply, 'you're an islander, you've lived here for a long time. You know most teachers only stay two or three years, so come on, your perspective can't help but be unique!' Pete smiles ruefully, then asks about the dressing on my shoulder. I dismiss it as something minor and avoid the

conversation, my desire to confide in someone is too pressing, my need for reassurance too great.

‘Well, we may as well get started,’ Pete says to the small gathering of diverse locals, including the local pharmacist, the island’s director of infrastructure, a mechanic and the woman from behind the counter at the only newsagency. ‘We are all at different levels so I will go fairly slowly, don’t worry about getting each position perfectly, just try and follow along.’ People take their positions and Pete stands at the front of the room. He talks us through the first couple of steps and we copy. I notice Kia, the local mechanic, tall and lean from his labour, moves effortlessly, with self-certainty, knowing each position by heart.

Once we have the hang of the first few moves, Pete breaks down the rest of the initial series into several parts, explaining the name and meaning of each move and why it is important. The names of the actions are beautiful, poetic—*part the wild horse’s mane, white crane spreads its wings, carry tiger to mountain*—and as he names each one, I have the bizarre realisation that my friend really is Chinese. This thought strikes me simultaneously as both profound and ridiculous. Of course Pete is Chinese, he has been the Mandarin language teacher at the local District High School for years, and I have always known something of Pete’s background through our conversations about travel and our shared interest in languages. I had asked to interview Pete with his cultural knowledge in mind. Yet it seems to me now that I had never really considered how Pete’s Asian origins affected his identity. With his broad, Australian accent and continually donned in board shorts and surf T-shirts, I had generalised that despite the obvious physical differences, our experiences of life were reasonably the same.

Having gone through each move, Pete asks us to now follow his actions, joining all the positions together in one continuous movement. I cannot take my eyes off him. A man in many ways like my own father, wry, self-depreciating and emotionally reserved, Pete has suddenly and unexpectedly transformed into a dancer, graceful, open, confident and lithe. The light catches his high cheekbones, his grey goatee and his lean limbs. Each finger is poised, angled artfully, his wrists turn, his arms gesture out toward the sea. On this occasion, Pete is uncharacteristically dressed in a white tank top and plain, cotton shorts, and in this

cinematic light, someone I have known for years is rendered a stranger, an archetype, timeless, a Chinese man in an island village moving with restrained beauty, aligned with a history I am only beginning to understand.

The following day I drive up the island's slopes, through Poon San heading south to the suburb of Drumsite to interview Peter Wei Cheon Ch'ng. Here, near the top of the island, the landscape flattens out and the road runs parallel to a dusty, covered conveyer belt transporting phosphate to the cove for export. Beyond this, the ocean can only just be glimpsed as a thin line glistening in the distance.

I turn off the main road and into the new housing development the government has built for teaching staff. I pull into Pete's driveway, climb the stairs and knock on the glass sliding door. No one answers. While I wait, I notice with a small sense of irony how the Education Department has given Pete a ground floor flat that looks over a small Chinese temple. Out of the corner of my eye, I see someone move. I wave and Pete comes to the front door, which I see now is slightly to the left.

'Sorry, have you been there long?' he asks, 'I didn't hear the doorbell.'

'Sorry, I didn't know there was one,' I say, 'it's all a bit fancy in these new apartments…'

'I know,' Pete laughs, but they've done a pretty good job for the Department, don't you think?'

'Yes,' I say, looking around and the bright rooms and open plan kitchen, quite different to the run down, aluminium home my family shared, full of missing louvres and mould-stained doors.

'I thought I would cook us some lunch,' Pete says walking back to his unblemished breakfast bar, 'do you eat omelette?'

I say I do, that he shouldn't have, but he is already mid-mission, the exhaust fan goes on and he wanders to the fridge for eggs.

'So…' Pete says in between looking for frypans, 'it's good you're doing this, writing about the island, I mean, about asylum seekers and the history here —these stories really need to be told. Because it's the remoteness and isolation that allows things to happen here, still does. Did you know they had a 'Protector of the

Chinese?' Pete laughs, raising one eyebrow, as he puts the saucepan on the stove. 'So we need these things out in the open, so people know. But it's not just the people on this island, it's the people on the MAIN island, Australia, who are divorced from what's going on, that are being given false information, or you could say "propaganda", so they don't know and they don't want to know, it's very sinister.'

As Pete talks, I am actually quite touched that he has made the effort to cook me lunch so soon after his return. Though we saw each other every day at work when I was on the island, it was my husband and Pete who became friends, through their shared love of playing music. Pete and I have never really spent much time together before, so it is strange to be together like this; strange, but good.

I tell Pete about being out at the fuel buoys and the Border Force vessel's slow slide into my day's frame. As he cuts up onions, I mention I find it interesting he has used the word 'sinister' to talk about what plays out in the Indian Ocean Territories, how it hits the nail on the head for me about something dark and unspoken, an unseen, largely unfelt toxicity behind all the beauty and richness of the place.

'And the two aspects were never reconciled,' I say, 'what was incredible and what was beautiful just sat alongside what was evil and dark, and both things remained true but couldn't quite speak to each other.'

'Well, even more so now there is the terminology 'Border Force', and they've all got black uniforms, it is very much like a Nazi uniform. I happened to meet the head of Border Protection a couple of years ago at a dinner when they were still called 'Customs'—he was a really nice guy. He said, 'Oh yeah, I've got to pack a gun now.'

I suddenly feel my body tense at Pete's casual reference to the presence of the Border Force on the island. The Australian Government established the Australian Border Force in July 2015, an agency which resumed control for immigration, Customs and border protection, modelled on the UK. The Border Force was established as part of a legislative act that introduced new secrecy provisions preventing those who worked in Australia's detention system from speaking about

what they witnessed.[7] During the time of my return to the islands in 2016, it was unclear whether the law could be applied retrospectively (for example, whether I could legally share what I witnessed in Australia's detention system from 2011 to 2014). I had received conflicting legal advice from universities and publishers but reassured myself that the Australian Government was unlikely to imprison a white, middleclass woman for sharing her stories—the Government simply could not afford the bad press. However, the penalty for revealing 'protected information' was a two-year jail term, should my judgement turn out to be wrong, so the latent stress remains. Pete's offhand comment reminds me of the risks I could be taking in my research.

Suddenly the smoke alarm goes off and Pete swivels around. From the frypan a cloud of thin smoke is rising, beginning to fill the room. 'Oh no, I forgot I was heating the oil!' Pete removes the frypan and turns off the stove and finds a broom to turn off the smoke alarm.

'Sorry, Pete,' I say, 'I should let you cook.' I shake off my fears and wander over to the couch and start to unpack my recorder and notebook to give Pete some space. When Pete has the kitchen back under control he comes and joins me, sitting across from me, my small recorder resting on the glass table between us. He begins telling me about when he first arrived on the Island in 1979, how he had shared a plane with Gordon Bennett. I check my batteries, turn on my device and press 'record'.

'When I arrived, Gordon Bennett was also on the plane, flying in to take up his post. After they registered the union with the Federation of Unions, the Christmas Island Workers Union became official and we had three of the most amazing years. Within the first few weeks there was a strike and they stopped work, it was very exciting and very emotionally powerful. Of course, I just loved the drama, they had a hunger strike and a tent city like the Aboriginal people outside Parliament House. There is an amazing amount of history, politics…'

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[7] The Border Force Act was watered down after a successful challenge by medical professionals in 2017, making the publication of this thesis legally possible. For more details on the Border Force act see: https://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-07-27/what-are-the-secrecy-provisions-of-the-border-force-act/7663608. To see a copy of the legislation see: https://www.abc.net.au/mediawatch/transcripts/1524_act.pdf.

Thinking back to the polarising effects on the community that the detention of asylum seekers had when I lived there, I ask Pete if he felt that the union movement divided the island at the time.

'Oh definitely', Pete replies, 'the government of course supported the private company (British Phosphate Commission). You have to remember it was a monopoly, so that's why the company could do virtually anything they wanted here because they subsidised Australian farmers for generations—cheap phosphate. Isolation means ignorance, misinformation, you don't know what is happening.'

I ask Pete if he felt particularly passionate about the conditions for Chinese labourers because of his own heritage. He agrees emphatically and begins to tell me with his own encounters with the British Phosphate Commission.

'Initially I was the only Chinese person allowed to live In Silver City,' Pete tells me. 'At the welcome to all of the teachers I felt a bit uneasy about this, so I went up to talk to the manager of the British Phosphate Commission. They were all English, predominantly. I went up to him and I asked "So, tell me, why am I allowed to live in Silver City?" I was just being cheeky, playing with the fact that I was not white. He replied, "Because you are an honorary white." I was fuming and upset at his response, so I nearly resigned and left. But I had met Gordon Bennett by then and so I thought, no, these are interesting times. I won't leave.'

As he speaks, Pete has become uncharacteristically animated, leaning toward me, his eyes lit, body alive. His experiences of racism in what he thought to be a progressive country in such recent times as the late seventies have clearly had a lasting impact. He makes eye contact, is present with me, yet from time to time his gaze focuses on a point beside me, like he is seeing the people and places he has encountered on the island all over again.

'The teachers were immediately members of the Christmas Island Club', Pete continues, 'which was *the* white place, and I remember going to movie nights. There were about four or five Asian supervisors at this time who were allowed to be members and a couple of them were also allowed to live in Silver City because of their standing. When we went to the club on movie nights, all the Asians would sit to one side and the whites on the other, so this is really apartheid in modern

Australia in 1979. Such a shock. The other islanders, including the teachers, were told not to get involved.[8]'

'Someone told me once there were even separate swimming pools, Pete —is that true?' I ask.

'Yes, there was a swimming pool down by the post office and no Asians were allowed because Asians had a separate swimming pool. The Asians' pool was a cooling pool for the big machines, so the water would gradually get hotter and hotter and dirtier and dirtier over the course of the day. So one night, I smuggled some Asian friends into the CI Club to swim there. The next day I got a call from the same English guy (the BPC Manager).'

Pete holds up a make-believe phone, extending his thumb to his ear and his pinkie finger toward his mouth, as he impersonates the austere voice of the British Phosphate Commission's manager, "Peter, I believe you had some *non-members* at the pool?"' Pete starts to laugh, then sighs briefly and shakes his head. 'I said, "Do you mean Asians?" I told him he could stick his membership and stopped going there from that point. Christmas Island was an amazing place then, it was an amazing time.'

Pete goes on to tell me that there were, in effect, two communities in the late 1970s on the island: the Asian community and the white community. The white community lived predominantly in the colonial buildings overlooking the ocean in Settlement (where I have hired my accommodation for this trip), as well as in Silver City where the Government workers were accommodated, while the Asian community lived further up the slopes in Poon San. Pete tells me that if, as an Asian person, you were found wandering through Settlement, the white community would ring the police and you would be physically removed. 'It was crazy,' Pete tells me, 'Apartheid.'

Pete goes on to tell me that Silver City housed a lot of teachers, with several teachers also housed at Drumsite, where he now lives. The Malay population lived

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[8] In regard to race relations as this time, the movie *Big Brother of Christmas Island* records this period as 'one of the most shameful in recent history, with a virtual system of apartheid operating as late as the 1970s'.

in the Kampong down at Flying Fish Cove. All the big houses belonged to the British Phosphate Commission.

'So it was really sharply defined,' Pete says. As he says this, I consider the ways in which the community is still largely structured in the same way, though presumably now by choice, as members of the Christmas Island population tend to be drawn to live alongside people with common heritage.

'Were the Malay people allowed to come to the CI Club?' I ask.

'Oh no, no Malays at all,' Pete replies, 'there were only a few Chinese, you know. So again I think this is how distance and living on an island protects a lifestyle and a worldview. Even the schooling system was separated. The fact is that people had rarely even heard of the islands, and this excluded us from the mainland consciousness, there was a kind of monopoly over people's lives. It was the same with the cheap phosphate, no one recognised what was happening to the workers here, the whole thing was bordering on unethical, almost criminal, I think. If a company did that today…' Pete begins to trail off, and as he does, he looks over at the pile of chopped onions on the bench in the kitchen, 'anyway, enough of that, I will shut up for a while and cook!'

After we have eaten our omelettes, Pete tells me that despite all of the challenges of island life, what keeps him on Christmas Island is the way it pares things back, brings him back to the question of what life is about. He tells me that he has shed a lot of baggage here, particularly the baggage that comes with the need for material possessions. The island has become a place that has helped him live simply, move slowly. As he talks, I find myself envying him. I remember when I left the Indian Ocean Territories I promised myself that I would take this experience of simplicity back with me, a life largely offline, where there was enough time, where you could be present, do one thing in each moment and stay with it until it was done. A life of reduced options, having no family and limited friends, meant I experienced, for the first time I can remember in my adult life, there being enough time for everyone and everything.

Yet once back on the mainland, the happiness afforded by this way of being soon slipped away. It did not seem possible to translate the island pace to the

stimulation and richness of city life. Now, sitting here with Pete, I remember what I have lost and I want it back. Christmas Island, with its layered, human history has clearly been complex from the start, but for those allowed their freedom on this semi-submarine mountain, what it gifts you is in many ways a rare simplicity, what feels like a step back into another time.

I think about what Pete has seen: the oppressive labour conditions based on race, the struggle and rise of the union movement, the apartheid against Asian people in modern Australia. While he is talking, I try and consider what his stories mean for my own journey—why I am here talking to him now, what it is that I need to navigate. Navigate, yes. I wonder if I am less trying to answer a question, as I first thought, than to form a map, fill in the contours. To understand exactly where I have been, really see that place for the first time, so I can step my way back to the changing sense I have had of myself and my nation since, undone and reinvented. Perhaps I am trying to find a way back home.

I draw my attention back to Pete. As we continue talking, I am intrigued to learn he was born in Singapore, not China as I had assumed, and moved to Australia when he was only thirteen. He left a violent father, but was ready for a new adventure, moving in with an adopted family in Sydney. His new family were kind but life was hard, for it was only once Pete left Asia that he remembers experiencing racism for the first time.

'When I was growing up it was the White Australia policy, the Yellow Peril, whereas now it is mainly prejudice against Muslims.[9] When I went to boarding school I was called a "boong" because they didn't have any other names. We had kids from New Guinea and they called them "boongs", so I was a "boong". And then there were Italians who were "wogs" so I was a "wog"…so I was called "boong", "wog", and the Vietnamese were called "slopes", so you'd get bundled up in all of that. And I can laugh about it now, for the most part. Being a teacher, I think I had

[9] In 'Against a Paranoid Nationalism', Hage notes, 'Australia's historically favourite "other" has always been "the Asians." The White Australia policy was designed with Asians in mind.' Concurring with Pete, Hage goes on to observe, 'In the last couple of years, however, probably to the relief of "Asians", White paranoia has shifted its gaze towards a more global threat: "Muslims" and "Islam"…Since the late 1990s the Muslims have become the main recipients of the "problems with multiculturalism" discourses…September 11 sealed the position of the Muslim as the unquestionable other in Australia today.'

the respect I wouldn't otherwise have had. That is why I was so determined to speak English better than Australians and I wanted to do a degree in English. I was also born in a British colony, so by accident, I have been very fortunate in my working life, but I never thought I was going to be standing in front of a class of people who would call me a "wog" and make them realise I was just another human being.'

While I had a vague sense of the White Australia policy as a racist piece of legislation severely limiting non-white migration and employment in Australia's colonial past, it was not up until this point in my conversation with Pete that I realised that this policy continued to exist in Australia's constitution well into recent history. The *Immigration Restriction Act* marked the formal beginning of the White Australia policy. It was one of the founding pieces of legislation introduced to the newly formed parliament on the twenty-third of December 1901. The White Australia policy remained within our constitution until its dismantling in the mid-1960s, and was not officially eradicated until the Whitlam government introduced policies such as the *Racial Discrimination Act* in the 1970s. Ironically, the White Australia policy appealed to the 'Fair Go' notion in our 'new', largely white nation, that saw itself as a 'working man's paradise'. This notion was threatened by those cast as inferior and therefore receiving lower wages; that is, non-whites, Indigenous Australians and even women. The legislative response was made to directly limit non-white migration to Australia, but the hostility in the nation was most overtly directed toward people of Asian descent, who were seen as intellectually and morally deficient.

This sanctioned hostility toward Asian culture contributed to the racism that Pete had to endure after his arrival in Sydney as a thirteen-year-old. Pete tells me his way of navigating this prejudice and learning to cope with racism in his adult life by acquiring a persona that enabled him to throw himself into his white world, essentially by playing the clown.

'Good morning, I am your Engwish teacher,' Pete would say to his new class of year seven students, straight-faced, dead pan, waiting for their response, and from this sense of play, connection and respect between him and his students was

formed. 'So really, that was fun, then. I was very lucky. But I had to become this clown to overcome my stuff.'

Hearing Pete's last statement, the idea that his experience of racism was 'his stuff', I suddenly feel a dull sense of sadness, a small amount of shame. When I was on Christmas Island in 2011, Chinese Christmas Islanders made up sixty percent of the population. Yet apart from the interactions with members of the community through my workplace and the rich festivals organised by the Chinese community, the extent of my interactions with the island's dominant culture were largely limited to ordering Beef Szechuan on a Friday night at Lucky Ho's.

I wonder at this, and think back to my own upbringing, to my formative ideas about Asia. I remember watching a group of Chinese tourists walking with friends and family at Cottesloe beach, my mother's quiet aside about the 'Asian Invasion'. I can still hear the spite in my father's tone talking about 'the Japs', and his tirade of quiet curses directed at 'Asian drivers'. I am left with the sense of a group of people hardly visible in my middle-class suburb in the hills of Perth, and barely tolerated. The silence and anger around Asian culture in my home, especially from my father, cause me to wonder what my father had learned from his own father, who returned from the Second World War hard and troubled, violent and schizophrenic.

To be fair, I know the main reason I did not actively form relationships with members of the Chinese community, or any community members apart from work colleagues and asylum seekers, was due to my own experience of being overwhelmed by what I witnessed working within Australia's detention system. Yet now, I begin to wonder if there was a vague and unacknowledged influence from the mundane racism that I encountered during childhood. Perhaps that is why I am here, perhaps that is why I feel the need to listen carefully, deeply. I want Pete to whittle away at that latent part of me that still unknowingly gives prejudice a home.

As the interview draws to a natural close, Pete and I begin to talk about the sea and the link it forms between him and Asia. Pete tells me he was born on an island and this distinct geographical orientation affects his experience of place.

'I think I always liked that idea of being almost surrounded by a force, an element, and it comes up with the Tai Chi approaches I was talking about, the

energy. I love it.' Pete tells me about 'dantian,' or, the 'sea of qi', the 'sea of energy' within us all, and the fluidity of water, literally and metaphorically connecting him with his own history, with Singapore, China and Hong Kong.

'I didn't realise you lived in Hong Kong as well!' I say, feeling my notions of identity becoming unravelled, teasing out to be something far more complex than I first considered.

'When I lived in Hong Kong I thought I would stay there for ever,' Pete says with his characteristic rueful laugh, 'because the Asian part of me sometimes wells up and I think "I don't really belong here." I can be sitting with a group of people and having a great time, there is nothing wrong—it is almost schizophrenic sometimes. I think, "Oh, today I just want to be Asian," or something. So I go and see an Asian friend. It's weird. When I moved to Christmas Island it was like, not coming home, like coming home to Singapore, but coming home to myself, I think. That's what it was.

My impressions of Christmas Island were very positive, it was exciting with the politics of it as well. I am very privileged, I feel, to be here. The ocean comes and goes, it is good, it is transient, it suits my nature. I just have this kind of love affair with this island and that has everything to do with the ocean.'

We start to wrap up as Pete needs to get to the post office before it closes at three. As I pack up my things, he tells me that while he feels ashamed of many aspects of Australian culture, he still holds hope for change.

'Australia as an island is so isolated, but we are changing. Two of my three kids are already married to non-Asians, my grandkids will all be Eurasian, so the integration between cultures will happen. For that reason, I think Australia can still be a great country if it wants to be, or we can choose to be a mediocre country that stumbles along. But I think at the bottom of our history is race, starting with Indigenous Australians. If we don't face that one…' and here he trails off. I pick up my bag and recorder. We hug goodbye briefly and then Pete hurries to grab his keys. Its two forty-five pm; he has fifteen minutes to get to the post office.

There is so much to unpack after my conversation with Pete. I am amazed to find we have talked for three hours, and I laugh wondering how long this conversation will take to transcribe once I am home. Then I realise I don't actually

mind. The stories Pete has told me feel incredibly important to my own understanding of the country where I live and the complexities of identity, that to take time with the recordings feels good, feels right. To trace the residues of racism in my own life is both confronting and freeing: confronting that despite my best efforts, I have not entirely removed prejudice from my mind; freeing that Pete's stories can help me see it, each story giving me a chance to set some rigidity in me free. Opening to Pete's experiences of the world helps me to feel more supple, more lithe. It is as though in the act of deeply honouring the weight of Pete's words, we both came out the other side a little lighter, his stories helping me to step more gently on the earth.

When I returned to Perth weeks later, Pete's stories continued to work away at me. My ambivalence toward Chinese culture was something that I realised I needed to address in an ongoing way—our first ideas about race can be incredibly formative and latent prejudices are rarely addressed in a single moment. I also felt I still had so much to learn about Chinese culture in Australia.

My encounter with Pete had a direct influence on my subsequent interest in the work of William Yang. Yang is famous for his photographic work in the 1970s, in which he documented Sydney's theatrical and social scenes, offering rare insights into the lives of high-profile creatives such as Patrick White and Brett Whitely. Yet it is the intimacy of Yang's later work, 'coming out' (in his words) as both gay and Chinese, that interests me most. In this role, Yang steps into the frame, into the fullness of his genius as storyteller: frank, trustworthy and tender.

I saw Yang perform in Perth in 2018, in a work entitled *Words and Image*. Reading an interview of Yang in the lead up to his performance, his words had an interesting resonance with Pete's first experiences of racism in Australia:

> When growing up, Australian cultural identity was mainly British-based, certainly white, with some Aboriginal stories uncomfortably reminding us of our past. Multicultural stories began to appear in the '90s. The 'wogs' came first but I was one of the first Chinese, albeit Australian-born Chinese, to tell a Chinese story. Everyone had known about a Chinese presence in Australia—

> there was a Chinese restaurant in every town from Broome to Barcaldine — but no one had heard a story told by a Chinese person. Things have got better since then.

During Yang's performance of *Words and Image*, I witnessed one of Yang's unique and dynamic creations of self-portraiture, rendered through the projection of a layering of script over Yang's iconic and intimate images, accompanied by his live narration in ever-changing and adaptable acts of oral storytelling. The stories Yang tells in his performances are revealing and confronting, stemming from his early sexual encounters as a gay man in the 1970s to his attempts to come to terms with the racially based murder of a family member in Queensland in the 1920s, his witness of his former lover dying of AIDS in the 1990s, and his own ongoing grappling with his Australian Chinese identity and heritage.

Yang tells us his shift in the late eighties to this performative mode of sharing his work did not come easily: 'I had to make a huge adjustment, from coming behind the camera as a photographer, to metaphorically standing in front of the camera. I didn't find it easy…' Yet is precisely this exposure of the man behind the lens that lends the work such a latent power, a power that leads even Yang himself to concede that his performances are the most consummate expressions of his creative process.

In particular, one of Yang's images and its accompanying story stays with me. The photograph is of a black-and-white image of Yang as a young child in 1947, in which he stands close to the camera with a small almost-smile on his lips, right hand holding the handlebar of what appears to be a tricycle just out of the frame. Over Yang's all-white clothing is black handwritten script, in which key words strike the viewer at random, like *ha ha ha, Mum, shocked* and *China man.* Projecting this image in the auditorium, Yang shared his story and read directly from the cursive script layered over the image:

> When I was about a six years old one of the kids at school called me a 'Ching Chong China man, Born in a jar, Christened in a teapot, Ha ha ha.' I had no idea what he was talking about but I knew from his expression that he was

being horrible to me, so I went home to my mother and said to her, 'Mum I'm not Chinese am I?' My mother said very sternly, 'Yes you are.' Her tone was so hard it shocked me. I knew in that moment being Chinese was like a terrible curse and I could not rely on my mother for help. Or my brother who was four years older than me, very much more experienced in the world. He chimed in, 'And you better get used to it.'

Yang delivered this story in a characteristically dispassionate way, his neutral manner making the story all the more disarming. The audience member is left alone with their personal reactions to Yang's revelation, their discomfort forcing them to step into, in Grehan and Sheers' words, the 'productive gap'. The spaces and gaps Yang leaves in his stories, the way he does not direct us toward any particular response or interpretation, invites us to actively participate in the formation of a cohesive and meaningful narrative. The performance becomes collaborative insofar as the spectator is invited to *be* the response, while also being free to join Yang's process of self-recognition. Yang's story is his own story, distinctive in his experiences of race, gender orientation and the product of his birth into a particular time and place. Yet Yang's story is also all of our stories. It is a deeply human response to an act of negotiating identity and relationships with others as we try to create a sense of shared meaning in the world.

In their conclusion of *Stories of Love and Death*, a book dedicated to celebrating Yang's work and legacy, Grehan and Sheer quote Kaja Silverman to explain the function of Yang's performances:

> to remember other people's memories is to be wounded by their wounds. More precisely, it is to let their struggles, their passions, their pasts, resonate within one's own past and present, and destabilize them.[10]

[10] Similarly, author Deborah Bird Rose, in 'Slowly - Writing into the Anthropocene', tells us that in true dialogue with one another, we must be willing to be vulnerable, to be changed. This idea is expanded upon using the work of Bird Rose, in 'The Archipelago of Us', the final chapter of this thesis.

It is precisely this process of destabilisation that makes Pete and Yang's stories so powerful and important. They unsettle us, they shake up our notions of who we think are as Australians and ask questions about the kind of people we want to be. To repeat Pete's words, 'I think Australia can still be a great country if it wants to be, or we can choose to be a mediocre country that stumbles along. But I think at the bottom of our history is race…and if we don't face that one…' His unfinished sentence becoming a crucial question I find I have a compelling need to answer.

7

A Door in my Ribs

Driving away from Pete's home in Drumsite, I sit with all that he has shared and understand that his honesty—the sharing of some of his most difficult experiences with me—is a privilege, a gift freely given. I return to my little cottage in Settlement and lie once again under the air conditioner, bathed in sunlight and washed in a deep sense of gratitude, an ancient frangipani holding deeply coloured blossoms against the sky. Later that afternoon, feeling refreshed, I decide to head down to Flying Fish Cove. I still cannot swim due to the incision in my shoulder, but at least I can cool my feet in the water, watching the sun lower itself into the sea.

I drive past the Chinese Literary Association, a small temple and the chalk boards where all the island's notices are written in bright colours. 'In Loving memory of Mr Gordon Bennett, Saturday 30th of July @ 2.30pm, Resting Place, Chinese Cemetery', one panel reads; 'Special Screening, *The Big Brother of Christmas Island*, *The Legend of Tai Ko Seng*', reads another, and I am sorry to have just missed such an important occasion for Christmas Islanders. 'Plastic Free July' reads another, but I miss the rest as I turn left off the roundabout, pass the Kampong and drive down toward the water.

Once I get there, the day is still bright and I can see it will still be a while before the sun sets. The phosphate ship has just finished being loaded—a plume of thin, brown dust hovers around the vessel like a dull aura. The enormous, blue ship I noticed earlier sits further out to sea, past the drop off. 'OCEAN SHIELD, SYDNEY', I can just make out on its wide, metal side. Bright life rafts glow orange, embedded high in the body of ship's dark stern. A large crane sits at the vessel's centre.

I walk down to the shore, coral pebbles clonking under my feet, looking at shells and coloured shards of sea-worn glass. I pick up one coral rock and turn it over, notice it is around the same size as those used to form the SIEV X memorial. I pick up another, then another, somewhat guiltily now, looking over my shoulder, hoping no one sees what I am about to do. It is not my monument, I was not here

when more than three hundred people drowned out beyond the horizon in this same sea, yet I do not feel I can leave the memorial so diminished. I feel torn, wonder if there is someone I should contact, someone I should ask. Still, I feel so strongly the need to resist the forces of forgetting, the ache of silence surrounding each lost life.

Going back and forward between the pebbled beach and my belongings, I pile around twenty coral stones by my towel. No one seems to notice. I return and rest my feet in the water, warm and gently lapping and my soles. The sun is low on the horizon now, clouds layer themselves, some white, thin and wispy, high against the blue, others gather low and grey yet not foreboding. I get up and walk along the path, head out along the jetty where I can still make out the shapes of fish in the water below. Out at the end of the jetty I can see a man fishing from the lower platform. I take the steps down to the grey, plastic mesh that sits just above the water and ask him if he is having any luck.

'Not yet,' he replies, 'it's just an excuse to be here, really,' and he smiles, looking out toward the setting sun. We get talking and he introduces himself as Tom. Tom is tall, broad-shouldered and fair haired, with an open face, still wearing his Hi-Viz work clothes. He asks why I am here and we get talking about island life, its cliques and challenges, the beautiful simplicity, the pared-back slowness of it all. I talk about my own frustration with the 'ins' and 'outs' of small group politics, especially with the loaded job of teaching asylum seeker children during my time on Christmas Island. I tell Tom about my disbelief when a teacher, who had been there at the scene on the day of the Christmas Island boat tragedy, later suggested labelling a new cocktail for work drinks as 'Refos on the Rocks'.

'Yeah, but sometimes you've got the laugh at the darkest things,' he says, 'or you go mad. I don't have a problem with that.' Tom pauses, then adds, 'I was there then too, actually, on that day.'

We both look out to horizon where Taj Jin house has begun to become grander than usual, a stark silhouette surrounded by sharply defined palms, their bold shapes striking against the glowing sky.

'At first I thought it sounded like people at the footy,' Tom says, 'you know, the rise and fall of voices.'

Tom tells me it was about six am when he had stood on the verandah of his home near Rocky Point, trying to make sense of the sound. He grabbed his camera, thinking something historic might be happening, and ran out toward the sea, toward the Golden Boson pub.

'There was a boat at the edge of the island,' Tom continues, 'all the people on board. One guy said, 'I wonder if we could throw rocks at them from here.' I said, 'Come off it mate, there are little kids in there.' I flinch, look toward him, but Tom does not seem to see.

'The backflow from the cliffs was keeping the boat away from the rocks. At one point the prow dipped and a man stepped off the boat and onto the rocks. I said, 'Shit! Look there's man standing right there!' As the boat came further around the point, it became windier and there was no longer the backflow to push it away from the rocks. It began to take on water.'

Now that Tom has begun to tell me his story, it seems like it is hard to stop, the words welling out, as if from a capped spring, a river wanting to find its way to the sea. I look back at the main jetty, there is no one else around. In front of us now, the water glints in the last of the day's rays, clear and turquoise. I look up to the edge of the cove, past the infrastructure of the small port, to where Rocky Point sits out of sight. I imagine the boat just off the edge of the island, the powerful swell of the wet season surging and foaming against the cliffs. So different to the stillness of the dry season, these days of blue skies and wide horizons, of glassy, paradisiac waters.

Tom tells me the boat had begun to smash against the cliffs. The islanders on shore ran to get life jackets to throw into the water, trying to urge the asylum seekers to swim away.

'There were dead babies floating in the water,' Tom says without emotion. 'The islanders had a rope and they tried to form a chain, while at the same time holding up their arms to avoid the debris from the broken boat the swell was throwing in the air. Everyone was getting covered in diesel and water. People in the water reached for the rope, but then a wave would come, draw back, and the asylum seekers would be gone. I knew there were caves under the water beneath the cliff. I saw a little girl with blonde hair, maybe five or six years old. She was

between the sinking boat and the cliff. A man was standing there looking pretty stunned on the broken boat. The people had their clothes ripped off by the surge. All the people drowning had lost their clothes. There were so many people, it was too much to take in, so I just focused on the little girl.'

Tom looks at me now as he speaks, but his eyes are full of memories, vivid and raw. He tells me the girl had a lifejacket on, that he signalled to the man the boat to reach out and grab the little girl.

'He lifted her up by her lifejacket, up and out the water like a ragdoll,' Tom tells me, 'but she was still breathing and moving her head. Then a wave came and slammed the boat against the cliff. People and debris were strewn everywhere. We knew the Navy was just around the corner at Ethel beach. We thought they must be coming at any moment. Another Navy vessel was further out to sea. No one came. Until the boat was in pieces and spread across the coast, nobody from the Navy arrived. When the Navy finally turned up at the scene, there was pieces of broken boat and bodies scattered everywhere. We were signalling from the cliff to the officers in the Zodiacs where people were who were still alive.'

Tom takes his gaze away from me and looks down at the water.

'Nobody talks about it. They had some kind of memorial service or something, but I didn't go, it was just people not directly involved who wanted to be in on the action, wanting to be seen to be there.'

Tom becomes quiet and I find myself not wanting to move, not wanting to make a sound, just trying to hold, to contain the weight of what he has just told me. I do not tell Tom I was one of those at the memorial service. Instead I look out at a dramatic, black headland obscuring the sun, a yacht picturesque on water's glass, the sky burning, blazing with orange light.

When I return to my cottage, there is no longer any question. Tom's story, though about the SIEV 221, has galvanized my will to redress the undoing of the SIEV X memorial. I log onto my computer and start to search for the SIEV X online commemoration sites. I take the rough, round coral pebbles I have collected and an black marker from my computer bag, and begin to inscribe the names listed on the screen – 'Zahara, 9 years', 'Miya, 4 years', 'Diya Alsadi' (no age listed), 'Raged Alsadi'

(no age listed), 'Amir, 61' and, heartbreakingly, simply the word, 'Baby'. I can no longer wait for my actions to be sanctioned, for permission, to care whether others judge my decision as right or wrong. Each act of inscription becomes an honouring, each name a will to see and grieve, a push back to those in authority, as well as those living on this island, that insist on other people's erasure. These lives meant something, each person brimming with hope for their future, each person wishing to live the fullness of their one, human life.

I line the coral pebbles along the arms of the lounge chairs and when it is done, and there are no more pebbles on which to write, I stop crying, wipe my eyes. For each act has felt like a door in my ribs pushed out against a harsh wind, opening me wide, inviting the whole beautiful and troubled world in.

8

Hand Held to the Flow

The following day I drive up the slope from Settlement through Poon San then turn left, heading to the top of the island up the steep slope of Phosphate Hill. Here the hospital sits high on the ridge, looking out over the sporadic building sites of a small new housing development designed to take advantage of the site's wide vista looking over the sea. Once inside, I do not have to wait long before a nurse steps into the waiting room and calls my name. As I step into the small consulting room, I am surprised and delighted to see that the nurse is Jeannette, a Cocos Islander who married into, and has become a part of, the Cocos-Malay community. Jeannette's blue-green tudung frames her pale face, spilling out in a feminine gesture in folds over her shoulders and bland nursing uniform.

'I wondered if it was you when I saw the name on the form,' says Jeannette, putting down my file, and we hug, get talking about Cocos life, about my time on Christmas Island and about my interviews, as her and Nek Su are on my Cocos list.

'I am just here doing some shift work for a few weeks,' Jeannette tells me, 'we head back to Cocos on Saturday, I think Nek Su would be happy to go tomorrow, he is already missing his fishing!'

I am excited about the opportunity to interview this unique couple, to learn how a white, mainland West Australian ended up marrying a Cocos Malay fisherman whose reputation equals something of a Cocos Island version of 'Old Man and the Sea'. So at ease is Nek Su in the water in his traditional jukong, owning an intelligence gained from being on the water since childhood, an ability to read the tide, the wind, the waves, that even the teenage Cocos Malay boys talk about him with a certain awe.

I am grateful to have Jeannette, rather than a stranger, remove my stitches when I feel so vulnerable. Jeannette commiserates that it is a horrible feeling, she has had several biopsies too, but reassures me, though more cautiously than I would like, saying, 'I am sure it is probably okay, I think you might find it will all

work out fine,' but her brow furrows as she takes out the plastic thread from my shoulder and after the last section is removed, she does not look me in the eye.

When she has cleaned up, we return to talking excitedly about Cocos, about the colour of the water, people and places we know, about the joy of being surrounded by beauty, the peace of floating on the lagoon when the world is still. Soon I register I should go as Jeannette has other patients to attend to, so we hug one more time and I step out of the hospital, out of the air-conditioning and back into the shock of the day's humidity.

After my appointment I don't head home but go back down Phosphate Hill Road, where the ocean is riding improbably high on the horizon, turn left onto Murray Road and drive straight out of town. Once I leave the asphalt and hit the wide, powdery limestone track, I feel a new freedom, feel I am moving out in widening circles to places and memories I hold dear. Almost immediately, a phosphate truck passes me, its wall of metal throwing up a plume of white dust, then I am alone, swerving around potholes, eyes feasting on forest.

Even though I am hesitant about taking Pete's car on such a rough track, after the rain the sky has cleared, and already I can imagine the Dales glistening in the morning light. I am keen to get another taste of the island's wild heart. I have packed water, snacks and plenty of repellent, as well as brought my fully charged phone, though I doubt there will be any reception if I get stranded out there.

The Dales are a unique, Ramsar-listed wetland boasting seven near-pristine watercourses. As well as being incredibly beautiful, this ecosystem also provides the habitat for wetland-dependent, nationally threatened species, including the Abbott's booby bird and Christmas Island frigate. I was amazed to learn Christmas Island supports the greatest diversity of land crabs on an oceanic island anywhere in the world, and the Dales are a breathtaking visual reminder of this, with all twenty species found on the site. Most notable is the red crab (which numbers tens of millions on the island, and whose spawn in turn provide the habitat and feeding ground for whale sharks in the surrounding waters), endemic blue crabs and the large, forbidding forms of robber crabs. Hugh's Dale (where I am heading today) is particularly loved and frequented by islanders and tourists alike, as it is one of the

rare places on the island where the permanent and perennial streams that course the semi-submarine mountain actually come to the surface.

Having believed I would never see this lush and magical world again, I am filled with joy and much anticipation as I bump my way along the road lined by tall, profusely flowering yellow bushes. At the sight of the workshop shed, I know to turn off Murray Road onto North West Point Road, and it is here I remember I will have to drive past the turn-off to the highly secretive North West Point Detention Centre. Even the thought fills me with rage, and I thump the steering wheel, feel my shoulders tense.

Soon the enormous green sign comes into view, with a curved line indicating the road to the Dales on the left and another short line that extends to the right, at the end of which are the letters 'IDC'. The euphuism further incenses me. In 2011 the detention centre was one of the largest employers on the Island, yet it hides behind an acronym, obscuring its dark economy: 'Immigration Detention Centre', a site of twelve attempted suicides or incidences of self-harm *every day.* The large infrastructure of the centre does not even rate a dot point on the tourist map beside me.

I pull over on the verge across from the sign and walk into the luminous rainforest on the path that leads down toward West White Beach, picking up a branch to clear the webs across the way made by large, striped orb spiders. Here the frigates call and click their long beaks, others carrying large twigs and branches to nests high in the canopy. Booby birds groan like dissatisfied old men, or croak conversationally from treetops. The familiar, surprisingly sweet smell of rotting leaves and guano fills my senses, air thick with water and humming with green, but as the track starts to become steeper I stop and turn back. I know the forest soon gives way to limestone cliffs I would have to scale using an anchored length of rope, and being on my own and not having told anyone where I am, I am reluctant to take the risk.

I walk, sweating, back up the path, and out into the clearing in front of the detention centre. I stand at the gate. It is open and no one is in the small, purpose-built guard's office. I remember during the time of the riots, the boom here was down and guards stood edgy, twitching with tension, wearing their dark uniforms,

talking into radios, one guard even following me part of the way as I took the path down to the beach.

Here on the road heading into the centre, I stand on my toes, try and see at least a little way in to the detention area, but the secrecy of the site is well-planned and effective, foliage and a small rise in the hill screening off almost all of the view in. I catch just the slightest flash of roof and can just glimpse the centre's ominous, high foyer. The rest is obscured and unknowable from here. I remember from my previous visits that the incarceration area is littered with CCTV cameras. I don't want to draw attention to myself, so I get back in the car and close the door behind me. I pull back onto North West Point Road, take the first turn left, heading west, driving under long arms of orange hibiscus, down into rainforest, and the watery world that is the Dales.

When I arrive at the first carpark, I stop, get out and look down at the four wheel drive track below. The road is steep, chiselled and uneven from the action of runoff carving small canyons in its surface. I decide to walk the rest of the way down and at once am pleased with my decision, as all around me layers of life, impossible to witness from the flash of view one gets from a car window, open up to me. Strata of fungi layer themselves up textured trunks, soft cups catching rain. Lichen and mosses paint brown trunks in a palette of greens, deepest khaki to an iridescence that is almost white. Strange plants splay like rubber fans from rotting logs, while other plants form sculptures that speak to me of the sea: coral shapes so layered and textured they are almost their own landscape, variegated colours looking calcified yet soft to touch.

I climb over logs toward the sound of water. One of the streams has come to the soil's surface, and I discover a scene so perfect it almost feels contrived. In front of me, an incredibly clear tributary rendered almost invisible by its lack of sediment, weaves its way through a small gully lined with tree ferns. Wide, woody roots curl out and catch the water with their soft 'U' shapes, and in the small pools formed by their brown cups, light blue crabs stand with their claws in the gently flowing water, pincers raised at my arrival like a salute.

I take off my shoes and immerse my feet in the cool water, follow the flow further downstream, where it cascades over a tumble of limestone. Over the limestone, a thick layer has formed like a wide, smooth stalactite, resembling what could easily be an artisan's water feature in an elaborate garden. Within the flow of the water, the rocks' grooves have trapped leaves of the brightest red; angled and stationary, lit and glistening, they are small installations in a world of greens and browns.

My experience of environments rich in biodiversity on Christmas Island and the Cocos (Keeling) Islands taught me daily that a deep joy resides where we see life thrive. I feel it here, where the triumph of life is resounding, me its lone witness with nothing to fear, just light exultant in leaves, abundance pushing up rich and strong. I laugh out loud with joy, stand there drinking the beauty in, looking, breathing, watching.

At some point I realise I will have to move on and so, somewhat reluctantly, I make my way back to the road. Once back at the dirt track, I continue down the slope, where banyan trees now drape their elaborate shapes across my path, forming living archways, and I feel heralded, like I am stepping through an ancient threshold. When I reach the bottom carpark, I am surprised to see no other cars there, then remember it is the time of the Festival of the Hungry Ghost, so many Chinese Christmas Islanders will not venture into the jungle for fear of troubled spirits at this time.

This idea of troubled spirits does not worry me; in fact, I am pleased as, selfishly, I do not wish to share this moment with other people. I walk past the signage, step onto the boardwalk, and a flood of memories seep their way into me. I feel a choking sensation in my chest, but I keep moving, letting the sensation wash through me, holding the burning gift of being able to return. I walk along the boardwalk to where another clear stream spreads wide across the forest floor and twenty or thirty red crabs glisten its shallow waters. I walk through mud where I remember my first experience of robber crabs waving their massive claws madly, like alien trolls guarding an entrance as my family stepped hesitantly between their bodies. But it is drier here today and the path is clear. While it makes the

thoroughfare easier to navigate, I miss their heralding, their strange blue and orange armour, large antennae breathing in the olfactory picture of each person.

I arrive at the stairs and begin to ascend the hill up through what has to be one of the most incredible sights on earth. To me, Hugh's Dale is a place of beauty expressed in the extreme, like walking into Avalon, sunlight glistening in a world hushed with foliage. Here, Tahitian chestnuts form a wide grove, ancient and enormous. Beneath their repeated forms, buttress roots curl in a sheen of water ten or twenty metres wide. In its flow, red crabs and robber crabs sit like strange creatures from another planet, lacquered by light resting on their water-bright shells, all the time hearing the sound of birds whooping and calling, the water flowing, wind-song whispering in the leaves.

I walk slowly, drinking in every leaf, every creature, climbing the steps, sweating into the humidity, until I reach the end of the path. And there it is, the waterfall, its storeys of liquid light, cascading over its own mineral formation, ferns and mosses, lichen and limestone. And at the base of its flow, so vividly, I can see him now, trousers rolled up to his shins, his face troubled but alive — Massom with his hand held out to the flow. And in that image, all the beauty and heartbreak I have held for five years; in that memory, the reason I have returned.

9

Behind the Wire

I first met Massom through a woman called Michelle, whose family lived on Christmas Island. Michelle was an education assistant at the school where I was working, writing her PhD about Australia's detention system. She had actively built relationships with many asylum seekers both in the family detention centre at Phosphate Hill and out at North West Point, the latter purpose-built for adult, male asylum seekers. Michelle knew I was interested in working with asylum seekers and was struggling to support the number of people with whom she had formed relationships, so she offered to take me out to North West Point to meet a friend.

I don't remember the drive through the rainforest, I don't remember what we talked about, but I do remember the strange feeling of driving into a zone that was cordoned off from the life and eyes of the public, like a parallel universe, a large, blank space on a collective map. As we drove in, razor wire shone in large, luminous curls, an endless glistening swell in muted light that made its way between clouds. At the corners of buildings, over doorways and along walkways, the repeated forms of metal boxes—CCTV cameras—cast their gaze over every angle and surface. I don't remember the details of passing through security, though Michelle must have spoken through the intercom for us to be let into the foyer, then there would have been paperwork, signing in and our bags passing through the X-ray machine, us stepping through the metal detectors as if they were a portal to another world.

What I remember is the series of steel re-enforced doors thick as the span of my hand that we had to wait for the guard to unlock in order to pass through, as though we were in a place surrounded by violent rapists, treading amongst serial killers. It felt incongruous, that vulnerable people fleeing this very kind of violence would find themselves locked up as though they themselves had committed their nations' crimes.

We walked down a dull tunnel, through more locked steel doors. While we waited for the doors to be opened, the architecture became stifling, oppressive. Here, I was diminished, found myself losing my desire to speak. We came out of the corridor and into a room where someone watched us from behind a desk through a window. First, we met a young Iranian man who had some English. Michelle and the man chatted, but I couldn't focus, struggled to think. The young man talked about the extreme boredom in detention for him and his friends. Michelle encouraged him to keep going to the gym, to keep active. The man told us he could not always go to the gym because the camp was now so crowded, but he reassured Michelle he would go when he could. Michelle gave him some biscuits and a guard took him away.

The room continued bearing down on me, fluorescent light nagging at my retinas, casting a cold light on the stark and featureless small spaces, claustrophobic in the extreme. There was no colour, there were no pictures, no windows except those between rooms that left me with a sense of being continually watched. I felt my mind starting to detach from my body, everything in me saying, *Run! Run!*

I remember feeling ridiculous, helpless, like I was a voyeur or a scientist witnessing some kind of gruesome experiment. *What happens to young men if we do this, and then this, and what about that…* Michelle turned to me and I smiled, trying to look appreciative of her efforts to include me. A year later when I moved to Cocos, I would revisit this memory, watching news footage of long-term detainees in this same detention centre on TV. The men on the screen, having committed no crime and being offered no future, dug their own graves in the courtyard, lay down and asked to die. But in 2011 at North West Point with Michelle, I had no concept of what would play out in years to come for detainees held on this island and elsewhere. We waited as the guard brought in another young man. We were introduced to Massom, who had come with a friend. Massom was a lean, Afghan man in his early twenties, with high cheekbones and olive skin. He wore a silver ring set with a large, turquoise stone. Massom only spoke Dari, so he was accompanied by a friend who had offered to translate.

Massom's friend, Reza, was also Afghan. He was short, chatty and affable, although he did not smile. By contrast, everything in Massom's body language

started to ring alarm bells in me. Though he looked fit, Massom stood stooped, almost curling into himself. His eyes had a glazed and haunted look, as if everything in him would like to disappear. I felt a sense of panic rising in me. For a moment I was no longer in the room. I sped away to the mainland, where I stood as a child, ten years old. A security guard wearing a blank face pressed a button inside glazed double doors. With my mother and two siblings, I walked through one door into a tiny foyer that felt even smaller as the first door closed behind us. Then a second door opened to a sullen woman at a checkpoint in the high-security psychiatric unit, who pointed us to a yard surrounded by barbed wire. Here I found the stooped form of my highly medicated father. With his elbows on his knees on a rough wooden bench, he lifted his head only slightly, said hello, voice strange, body racked with shame. My father was a picture of a man defeated.

Michelle began to introduce us, and I was brought back to the present. I waved hello and tried to look into Massom's eyes, but he kept his brow low, like he was being surrounded by cars on high beam. I thought of the elephants at Perth Zoo, cordoned in concrete too long. There was great excitement as the new enclosure was built, a lush and generous expanse filled with gardens, ponds and vines. When the elephants were finally moved, they walked in the same figure of eight, didn't touch the grasses, didn't roll in dust. Just round and round their footsteps went, pacing their mind's perimeters, forever inscribed with the size and shape of their former cage.

My mind whirred, my heart beat so hard I could feel its hurried rhythm in my chest. Massom's voice did not sound right, like his tongue was thick, like he had no air. He fidgeted, distracted, body wilting before us. My mind repeated over and over what I immediately and deeply knew: *if this man is forced to stay much longer in this place, he will not survive.*

Michelle gave the men biscuits and chocolate and Reza began talking about what had been happening in the detention centre since Michelle's last visit. Michelle asked Massom if he had heard anything more about his visa. As Reza translated, Massom's face wore an expression like he was in pain. He became more agitated, even animated, talking in small bursts, his brow furrowed, his hand with the blue stone rising and falling as he spoke.

Reza interpreted, telling us that Massom had been through his second round of interviews. Massom could not sleep, he was worried. The Department of Immigration had been using Iranian interpreters and Massom believed that the Iranian interpreters were racist toward Afghan people. He was upset because he feared the interpreters were downplaying his case — he worried that they would not pass on information vital to gaining his refugee status.

Michelle asked Massom about his inability to sleep, and Reza interpreted that Massom tossed and turned all night, that he could not stop thinking about what had happened to him, he just went over and over all he had been through in Afghanistan. He had been waiting for his visa for months now, just waiting with nothing to do except worry about the interpreters and sit around.

'He is scared he is going to go crazy,' Reza told us, 'he said he is worried he is going to be sent back to Afghanistan and things will be even worse than before, because not only will he be back with all the problems in his country, but he will also be crazy. He says he can't wait anymore, he is very scared he is going to go crazy.'

Michelle encouraged Massom to hang in there, assured him that his visa was being progressed and that she would keep coming to check on him. Reza excused himself and left for his appointment. Michelle tried to continue to the conversation with small phrases of Dari, checking in with Massom on her pronunciation, but real conversation became virtually impossible. Eventually we said goodbye and Massom bowed slightly with his hands pressed together, 'Thank you,' he whispered in English, then the guard came and we were taken away, back through locked and steel-bolted doors, under surveillance cameras, through X-ray machines and back outside, the fence-wire glinting brightly in midday sun.

Michelle must have been used to this, she seemed almost cheery, but I could barely speak. I asked her how to apply to take people out of the centre, vowed to myself I would get this man out from behind the wire, that I would help him hold onto life until the day he was handed his visa.

10

A Person Like Any Other

It takes me several calls and a large amount of legal paperwork, but the day finally comes when my husband, Ash, and I are able to take Massom out of the detention centre and show him a little bit of the island where he lives. I organise to take another asylum seeker, Erfan, who acts as a volunteer interpreter in my classroom, so Massom is able to communicate with Ash and me. Erfan is an Iranian student around seventeen years old, slim, intelligent and pale-skinned with immaculate nails. He has a strong command of English though his first language is Farsi. Farsi and Dari are similar languages, so at least it will make some communication with Massom possible.

We pick Erfan up first from the family compound, signing him out at the security checkpoint where the overweight, bleach-blonde Serco guard sternly warns us he is due back at three pm 'and no later'. We then head back out into the national park, bumping our way over the white dirt road toward North West Point. When we arrive this time at North West Point, though the site remains confronting, I feel almost breathless, hardly believing that despite all the signs signalling a site of punishment and deprivation, Massom will be allowed to step through the door's portal and into our lives. And after more form signing and an even sterner warning, he does. The air lightens. We walk out to the car in sunshine, and there he is with us. Massom becomes a person like any other, sitting in the back seat of our car.

We drive up the small hill and out of the detention centre. Heading back toward town, a cloud of frigatebirds weave their dark paths over a conglomeration of old sheds. Massom points and Erfan asks what they are called. We talk about the frigates, driving along like it is the most ordinary thing in the world.

As we bump over the wide, limestone road, I turn to Erfan in the back seat. Erfan and I have been working together for some months now, and I know he is self-assured and open to robust discussion, so I feel I can ask him questions that I would not ask of other detainees.

‘Erfan,’ I venture, ‘I am not meaning to be disrespectful, but I would like to learn more about your story. It is just a bit confusing trying to work it all out. I guess for most people it would be easy to see why Massom is seeking asylum as there is a war in Afghanistan, but there is not a war in Iran, though clearly people have needed to leave. I just wondered—why it is people need to flee?’

‘Ah, well,’ says Erfan, sitting up, leaning forward in his seat (I am relieved to see I have not caused offence), ‘at the moment with a new government, Iran is very oppressive, you cannot speak freely and the president wants to force a particular form of Islam on the people, but it is not really Islam, it is something far more extreme. He just wants to use Islam as an excuse to control the people. But it was not always like this. Historically, Iran has been one of the world’s great powers. Iran was a leader in the arts and education, a centre of philosophy, literature and debate of new ideas. Many people do not realise that women were free to wear what they liked, even miniskirts, into the late 1970s. In fact it is quite ironic, you see, because at that time you could actually go to jail for wearing a hijab! But when the new government came to power, everything changed. My father and I were both at university. I don’t know really what to say, how to explain, except just to say to you what it is like when you are at a protest and you hear the shots fired and you have to run. You run and you run until you cannot run any more, but still you hear the guns firing behind you, and even though your legs are burning, all your muscles aching, you have to find it in yourself to just keep going.’

I drop my eyes, a little ashamed that he has had to spell this out to me, that Erfan has had to relive such a terrible ordeal.

‘Thank you, Erfan,’ I say quietly and he smiles, settles back in his seat. I turn to the front of the car and look out of my window in silence.

We drive along Murray Road and back through town, heading out to the Grotto, so we can show the men where the ocean hisses through the gap in the rock and how the pool of water at the base of the cave glows like an apatite gem. The contrived nature of our outing together gives the moment all the strangeness of a first date. We then drive out to the cove where Ash and I sit and chat to Erfan under the shade of a wide tree, while Massom walks out over the coral beach toward the water. I think he is glad to be here, but he does not look happy, and I feel my

disappointment, realise I should have known it would take much more than this. Massom walks back toward us, wants to give me something. In my hand he places the gift of a small, white shell.

Before we head back to the detention centres, Ash and I drive Massom and Erfan to Territory Day Park. Here, from a lookout at the edge of a sheer cliff, you can watch the golden bosun and brown booby birds gliding above the forest canopy and look over the aerial-like view of Flying Fish Cove. We look down at the birds and see the shape of the reef below them—the small, submerged islands of coral, bright flippers of divers pushing through the surface. Beyond that is the vast, curved horizon over which both men have come, the jetty their first landfall after their dangerous journeys at sea. Massom is quiet, looks at the view below and out toward the horizon for a long time, like he is reading something in the water, then we all turn around and get back in the car.

I feel like I have let Massom down, like there was something more I could have done, though I don't know what. As we get out of the car at North West Point he pauses before he undoes his seatbelt and says something, his eyes searing, intense.

'He says thank you and wants to know if you will come again, please. He is very grateful, but he wants to make sure he will see you again,' Erfan interprets.

'Yes, Massom,' I say. 'I promise you, every month I will be here until you get your visa.' Erfan interprets what I have said and then Massom says something briefly and looks back to me.

'He says thank you,' Erfan says, 'he says thank you very much, but please, he just asks you—don't forget.'

The woman from the Immigration Department I have been liaising with has been consistently warm and appreciative of our efforts to help. However, the third time I go to apply to take Massom and Erfan out, the Immigration Liaison Officer has changed. They have never heard of me or Massom, say they don't know if this arrangement is possible. I reassure the official that it is very possible, in light of the fact we have already taken Massom out several times. I give the name of the last officer I arranged the trips with, Massom's identity number and the previous forms

we have signed. Eventually, the officer relents and, knowing he is unaware of what has happened in the past, I apply for a longer period of time with the young men. To my surprise, it is approved. We get five hours.

Each successive time I take Massom out, he seems to unfurl like a slowly opening flower. He stands taller, his eyes become animated, responding more and more to the world around him. I am heartened. It is breathtaking to watch, a confronting power to be able to own. For just a moment, I am able to gift another human being their freedom.

Today we are heading out to the Dales. As the car passes under the elaborate, draped limbs of banyan trees, I realise I have never seen Massom look so alive and am moved that something so simple could bring so much pleasure to another human being. He stares out of the window to where the clear stream runs parallel to the road, the water offering us glimpses as it comes in and out of gullies and between tall stands of ferns. I watch Massom watching the blue crabs, half in and half out of the water.

We pull into the bottom carpark, cover ourselves with insect repellent and have a large swig from our water bottles so we don't have to carry them. Ash, Massom, Erfan and I walk toward the boardwalk, at the start of which several signs have been placed.

'Wow', Erfan says, 'Ramsar, I know this, this is amazing.'

'Yes,' I say, 'the Dales are a Ramsar-listed wetland, it is a very special place. So great to be able to get that international recognition, especially in such a remote part of the world.'

'Yes, but do you know that Ramsar is a place in my country? The Convention was named after a city in Iran where it was first signed, I think in the 1970s. It is so amazing to see it here, here!' Erfan exclaims, gesturing to the rainforest around us.

'That is amazing!' I say, 'I had no idea.'

But Massom is not interested in the sign. He has stepped onto the boardwalk and begun to walk beneath the towering Tahitian chestnuts, where the frigatebirds are beginning to call with a long, low *whooooop*, *whooooop*, *whooooop*. Massom points to the canopy above his head.

'Monk?' he begins to ask.

‘Monkeys? No, they are birds,’ I laugh, and flap my arms to show what I mean. Massom turns in a circle where he is standing, he raises his arms, raises them high and wide, turning and turning, laughing and looking at us in disbelief. He is exhilarated, standing in the jungle, with the wild sounds of the world all around him. I watch him, it is breathtaking, incredible, something I had started to believe was not possible. He turns and whoops and laughs and all I want to do is watch, to be steeped with the wonder of this moment, watching everything in Massom spark and glow.

Soon we arrive at a juncture, where we turn left and begin the ascent up the gentle slopes of the hill alongside the clear, wide stream making its unhurried way to the sea. The climb becomes steeper, the air filling with the acrid smell of moisture and leaves. Sweating into the humidity, we finally reach the last platform, and as we do I take my final step up and then desperately try to stop myself bursting into laughter. For there at the pinnacle is not only the thunderous wall of water cascading between lush ferns and netting the light, but at its base sits a beautiful young woman with long, blonde hair in a bright pink bikini.

I can’t help but look briefly at Massom and Erfan. They both look completely stunned, but seem to be trying not to stare, so I busy myself with my bag and give them a moment. I wonder how far this scene must feel to the men from the concrete and steel of their respective detention centres. Soon the girl and her older friend dress and leave, and we all go and stand with our feet in the flow, reach out and cup the water, feel the spray from the fall form a moist haze around our faces. We explore upstream, where the water pools wide and dark beneath tall trees, and where yet more blue and red crabs hide amongst elaborate roots. Years later, Massom will write to me from Melbourne, will tell me this was one of the best moments in his life.

11

The Wild Air

When I organised the trip to the Blowholes, I was not to realise this would be the last time I would see Massom. When we sign him out of North West Point he looks distracted, does not meet my eye. When we finally get through the paperwork, receive the usual sullen warning to get him back on time, and make it out to the carpark, Massom turns to Erfan, indicating he would like him to interpret. Massom talks to Erfan and then Erfan turns to us.

'He says he wants to thank you so much for coming. He says, though, that he has been a bit worried, it has been a long time, he was very worried that you would not come.' I try to push away the guilt that Massom had had to wait almost two months between visits.

'Erfan, can you tell Massom,' I say, looking at Erfan and then deep into Massom's eyes, trying to show I understand and am sorry for his stress. 'Can you tell Massom that the liaison officer changed again. It was very hard to get to see you both this time, they would not return my calls and I had to email lots of times. Please tell him I am very sorry, that I did not forget him, but there was nothing I could do.' Erfan interprets and Massom, though his brow is deeply furrowed, nods in understanding. The men talk.

'He says he understands, he is sorry to ask, but he was worried.'

'Sorry,' I say directly to Massom, and he nods once more, bows his head and looks away, seeming to try and contain his emotion. We get in the car. I do not tell Massom that though the repeated change in liaison officers had been a huge challenge, each time the newly appointed officials becoming more and more obstructive, the delay had been somewhat of a reprieve for me. My father had been diagnosed with stomach cancer, and though it is treatable, my sense of responsibility to him as well as my young students—many of whom are beginning to struggle psychologically with the conditions of long-term detention—is starting to feel overwhelming. I barely have a life outside of my work with asylum seekers, and

my advocacy for the people I work with increasingly alienates me from other islanders. The asylum seekers are starting to become one of my only sources of friendship, yet the government exerts such a huge amount of control over asylum seekers' lives that I can only see my 'friends' when the government allows. We all live with the constant uncertainty that any of the detainees can be transferred at a moment's notice, and no one will be told where.

Today we are driving away from the North West Point detention centre and the Dales beyond, to the other end of the island. We head out on North-South Baseline Road, and through the window I stare into the dense canopy of rainforest, try to soak in the layers of life: the wide, green leaves of elephant ear plants; the bird's nest ferns ringing life from forks in trees; vines and ferns; bright fungi and trunks wearing coats of lichen and moss, all held beneath the roof of tall, lush trees. Here, life pushes up, urgent and potent, and something in me starts to resound like a well-honed bell.

'Miss Reneé,' Erfan still seems to like calling me this, as though it is my real name, not a title given to me in the classroom. I don't mind, in fact I have come to love my new name, the term now filled with so many positive associations, even preferring the mistaken title 'Miss My-name', given to me by some of the younger children.

'Yes, Erfan,' I turn in my seat as Ash drives, greenery whizzing past the windows.

'I just want to ask, do you believe in ghosts?'

'Well I am not sure, Erfan,' I respond, 'I have never seen one, but I don't think that necessarily means other people's experiences of ghosts are untrue. Why?'

'It's just there is a very strange thing. You see, I don't really believe it, but in the detention centre there are many people who do, it is mainly the Afghan people. And the Afghan people are saying that there is a ghost by the toilets, that she is a little girl and she is crying. And though I don't believe in ghosts myself, they are so upset, you can see it in their faces, like it is real. It is a very strange thing.'

I remember thinking at the time that this was odd, that there were no workers' children at the time of Chinese indentured labour at Phosphate Hill,

wondering who such a small ghost could possibly be. Years later, reading back over Zainal Madjid's speech given at the SIEV 221 Memorial Service and listening to Tom's deeply moving recount of the boat tragedy, I will think back on Erfan's story, putting together pieces, traces that suggested a reason for the appearance of such a young and grief-ridden ghost.

We reach the turnoff and as we turn into the cool canopy of trees the way becomes littered with red crabs. I show Erfan how to take a branch and gently sweep and scare the crabs to the side as the car crawls along the track at walking speed. Finally, we make it to the carpark and again coat ourselves with mosquito repellent and sun cream before making our way between sharp pandanas toward the jagged rock.

To me, the Blowholes always have a mythical feel to them. On the boardwalk, visitors can walk out into jagged rock, witness a scene that seems actively hostile to life: thin slices of limestone thrust up, a sea of calcified knife-edges. Between the sharp ridges of rock, a perennial mist hovers as the ocean, breathy, restless, hisses up between holes in the outcrop sending out a fine spray of mist. The mist settles, forming a series of small, salty rock pools, and the water surges up once again, slowly eroding and softening the spaces between. In that strange light, these dips read like an exaggerated moonscape, rock becomes the repeated form of crater upon crater. Somewhat impossibly, brown grapsus crabs cling to the side of the serrated rock, their variegated forms edgy and erratic as people walk between them on the boardwalk. In the distance the ocean is blue beyond belief, a glinting, cerulean plain, shifting and dark. The signage tells us that here, too, the sea cliff plunges straight down kilometres to the ocean floor.

Today the ocean feels more alive than ever as Massom and Erfan turn their heads to its hiss and growl. Small towers of water push up, making us jump, we catch our breath at its sudden, liquid columns of light. We wander between the rocks, not really talking, eye contact and gesture a conversation that includes us all. Then suddenly a lump of blue swell rushes under the lip of rock and into the network of underground caverns. The air shouts its way out of the rock, pushes up a dazzling fountain of seawater high over the young men's heads. They begin to run, but the water outdoes them, throwing bright, white balls over their bodies. They

stand shocked for a moment, then with a look of relief, realising they are safe, begin to laugh. They look down at their wet clothes, at each other's glistening faces. Animated, breathless, they begin to laugh hysterically now, exhilarated, animated, wild air whipping at their bodies.

We go to the café for lunch and here again I feel the disjuncture. Erfan is happy, ordering a hamburger and chips, but I can see the distress written across Massom's face. Suddenly I realise; bacon and eggs, hamburger, ham and cheese croissant, what was meant to be a treat is a minefield for a Muslim man trying to order something that is halal on the menu. I kick for myself for my oversight, bringing back the furrowed brow on Massom's face as he picks through his tomato and cheese toastie where I am sure the fat of pig would have found its way. I apologise to Erfan for not considering a halal menu when I chose the café, but he laughs, says 'There is Muslim, like this, very strict,' showing one hand, 'and Muslim like this,' unfolding his other immaculate, pale hand. 'It's not a very big deal.' He smiles happily, biting into his burger, sips on his vanilla milkshake.

'Don't worry too much, he will be okay,' Erfan says, indicating, but not looking, at Massom. Erfan is getting tired of translating now, does not pass on everything Massom says, and I start to see the world of detainees brings with it the complexities and tensions played out in their respective nations.[11]

As we labour through our meals, Massom suddenly sits up and begins to point excitedly, saying something.

'What is he saying, Erfan?' I ask directly.

'Oh, something about that lady with the blonde hair over there, I think she is his case worker at the detention centre.'

I turn and see a slim, young woman directly behind us in a brown, collared Department of Immigration shirt. Massom is pointing right at her, smiling, but she

[11] Ghassan Hage, in 'Against a Paranoid Nationalism', points out that that those who experience racism are not 'the repository of innocence, passivity and goodness...Why should the victims of racism be any more or less racist that the perpetrators?' he asks. 'There is no reason why those subject to racism of the worst kind should not be racist themselves...The question of who has *power* to activate their racist fantasies...is crucial.' That said, I found the Hazara refugees, an ethnic minority who had experienced one of the most lethal forms of racial hatred in Afghanistan, to be some of the most compassionate and open human beings I have ever encountered.

pretends not to see him, turning her head away from him and leaning in closer to focus on her friend. Massom seems to find this hilarious, watches her, his eyes lit up and animated, like it is the funniest thing in the world that they should be at a café together. I stare at her, wondering why she would not acknowledge him, but he doesn't seem to mind.

As we finish our meals and are about to head off, Massom says something in earnest to me. I look to Erfan, and Erfan says without expression, 'He is saying thank you, thank you so much to you both. He is very happy that you came to get him, he was waiting every night for you to come. He says you are like a mother to him.'

I burst into laughter, wondering how old Massom thinks I am, and Ash and Erfan laugh with me. I look up to see Massom, wearing a face both confused and hurt.

'Oh no, please tell Massom I am sorry. Please say thank you, he is special to me too, being like his Mum just made me feel old.'

Erfan says something, but Massom still looks confused, and I worry I have offended him, worry that Erfan has enjoyed distinguishing himself from Massom through his ability to make sense of the joke, while Massom cannot, and I am left with not knowing how to bridge the apparent gap.

It is late afternoon now, and the four of us drive down to Waterfall Beach, just past the island's defunct resort. The cliffs wrap around the small bay filled with coconut palms. Waves surge over the reef but the tide is low, leaving piles of flotsam, rubbish and coconuts along the shoreline. Ash has brought his machete and I ask Erfan if he knows the best way to open coconuts. He looks at me, surprised.

'I wouldn't have a clue,' he says, seeming somewhat repulsed at the idea. He sees I am taken aback, and then patiently explains, 'there are no coconut trees in Tehran.' I tense, feel embarrassed, finding my overgeneralising of asylum seekers' lives exposed. Of course, Erfan is urban through and through: he lived in Tehran, the most populous city in Western Asia. When you are surrounded by close to nine million people, the chances are you don't have many occasions to crack open coconuts.

I turn to Massom, and he immediately responds, taking the coconut and the machete. I realise, given the efforts at security, that this is probably not the kind of activity Immigration had in mind. But Massom is so natural with the blade, opens the coconut in seconds, breaking the white flesh into pieces and handing them to me. We sit down on a large log that has washed up and eat the coconut. I show Massom how the robber crabs have emerged at the smell, throw them a piece, and he watches the enormous crustaceans lift the fleshy fragments to their mouths.

Tenderly, Massom kneels down and feeds small sections of coconut to each one, handing me fresh pieces so I can do the same. Eventually I indicate I have had enough, and Massom becomes silent, stares out to the horizon, his mouth a small line on his poker face. We are all quiet now, slow, and I wonder if they reach a point where this, too, is tiring for them, being with me, with Ash, whether they reach a point where they are ready to make their way back to their strange homes.

The sun is low in the sky now, and I am worried they will miss their evening meals, so we walk back to the car. The sun sets as we drop Erfan back to the family compound, and I watch Massom looking at the Phosphate Hill camp, its faded dongas surrounded by low, green pool fencing, the islanders' playground and community cricket field visible beyond. I wonder how this clear disparity must feel.

When we get back to North West Point it is dark. I hand Massom some photos from our trip to the Dales months before and a copy of a surfing magazine. I indicate he needs to put the photos in the magazine. Volunteers and teachers are not allowed to give photos to detainees of them on excursion, or on Christmas Island at all, but Massom had asked for a copy as we had dropped him off on our last trip. I printed the photos for him in full knowledge that these images of beauty and of him being somewhere other than detention were exactly the kinds of things that could see him through.

We wait at the glass door under the CCTV camera and someone presses a button so we can go in. I stand in the foyer and try to catch someone’s eye, but no-one will look our way.

‘Excuse me,’ I say to the woman in a blue Serco shirt at the counter. She looks at me with clear distaste.

‘Look, we are busy at the moment, you will have to come back in the morning.’

‘Oh,’ I say, very tempted to take Massom away, ‘you don’t want your client back then?’ The woman looks shocked, raises her head to see that the man standing next to Ash is in fact a detainee.

‘Well you should have said!’ she says angrily, and she pushes a sign-in sheet toward us. A man comes around the counter and asks Massom to put his water bottle and magazine on the conveyer to go through the X-ray. Massom puts them down, and the guard picks up the magazine and flicks through the pages. My heart goes into my chest. Massom looks sideways at me, and we stand there silent and waiting. But the guard does not seem to notice, puts the magazine back on the conveyer belt, and the water bottle and hidden photos pass to the other side. Massom watches them, then steps through the metal detector and does not look back.

One month later, Michelle tells me that Massom has been given his refugee status. I am thrilled, he is on his way now, any moment his visa will come, he has made it. I tell myself Massom does not need me to take him out now. My father’s diagnosis has changed: the treatment of the tumour on his stomach was successful, but in the meantime the cancer has spread to his liver. I am finding it hard to get information—my father seems confused, making it difficult to know what this new diagnosis means.

Finally, I call the oncologist, leave my mobile number with the secretary. When the oncologist calls me back, I am in the car. The line is full of static, we end up shouting in order to make ourselves heard. But between the crackles of the line and the car’s diesel engine he finally gets the words through—my father’s cancer will be fatal—he has eight weeks to live.

It is a Wednesday afternoon when I see Michelle chatting to some teachers outside my classroom. I grab my things, lock my door, and join them on the concrete path. The day is humid and sweat gathers in the creases at my elbows and

knees. The teachers are talking about a TV program I don't know, but I stay a while, just listening to their conversation, needing the company.

'When do you head off, Michelle?' I ask.

'Tomorrow,' she replies, 'I think it's time to get back to Perth, start to knock this thesis on the head. My supervisors are starting to get a bit narky!' I laugh. 'Oh, Reneé, did you hear about Massom? It is very sad.'

'No' I say, 'I haven't seen him for a while.'

'Oh, he tried to kill himself, I hear he has been medivacked off the island.'

I do not believe it.

'But he had his refugee status,' I say.

'I know, I know, just makes it all the sadder. I heard he swallowed razor blades and bleach, but he survived.'

'Where is he now?'

'In Melbourne somewhere, apparently.'

'Oh, okay.' My mind goes blank. People begin to chat about food in Melbourne. I say my goodbyes to the group and walk away. I feel nothing, I do not feel a thing.

12

Why He Stays

The pressure to remain silent about asylum seekers and the cruelty of the detention system was so pervasive during my time on the island; it seemed to suck the oxygen from the atmosphere. Yet silence is never total and erasure never complete. All around me small cracks occurred in this culture of amnesia, and light and air leaked into the shuttered room of our conversations, sometimes from the most unlikely places: a compassionate Serco officer here, an outspoken nurse there, a surprising story of connection or compassion from a tradie consigned to work on the detention sites, even if some invariably lapsed back into old prejudices.

One of these moments of light and breath on Christmas Island occurred the first time I heard Zainal Majid speak. Zainal was President of the Islamic Council in 2011 and was asked to talk at the Memorial Service of the SIEV 221 on behalf of the SOS volunteers present on that day. Before Zainal had spoken, I had begun to give up hope that the absolute horror experienced by the asylum seekers aboard the *Janga* would ever be openly acknowledged, the service acting as some kind of bland sanitisation of the extreme suffering that took place on the island's shores. But after the address by the imam on behalf of the Islamic community, Zainal had stepped up to the microphone quivering with raw emotion, his words steeped with the authenticity of a human inhabiting his vulnerability. Exposing his broken-ness to the large audience of locals, officials and politicians, Zainal sobbed his way through his recount of what took place on that fateful day.

Zainal's courage had engendered the enormous amount of respect I have for this local Malay man. I had hoped for a chance to speak with Zainal in particular during my return visit, not just about his experiences of the tragedy, but also to get a sense of how he saw his island home. I felt this was a person I could trust, who would be honest with me, and whose lens might very different from my own both as a Malay Christmas Islander and as a man deeply connected to the Muslim population on Christmas Island. However, I felt intimidated by Zainal's title, still

President of the Islamic Council five years on, and I had no real inroad into the heart of the Islamic community through my own contacts. I resigned myself to the fact that this interview would probably never happen.

However, while warming up for Pete's Tai Chi class in Poon Saan, Kia the mechanic and I had got talking about my research. Kia turned out to be a friend of Zainal's and happily gave me his mobile number, and Zainal, though somewhat surprised by my phone call and request, kindly agreed to meet with me at the Kampong. So on the day after my walk through the Dales, I once again clamber into Pete's little white car and bounce along the island's foreshore to interview Zainal. As I drive, I glance once again at the CLA Club, its long rectangular form raised on stilts, visualise the large deck on the other side that allows for magnificent views over the water. It must have been somewhere along here that the cooling pool for the mine's engine's was once located (the same one where the Asian community was permitted to swim), since washed away by violent storms that swept the foreshore in the 1980s. I continue through the roundabout and its chalk boards, past the Post Office site where the 'whites only' pool had so recently enforced its strange apartheid. Beyond the Post Office, I gently put on the car's breaks as I drive down a small, steep slope where, on my left, the blue form of concrete flats rises above a screen of banana trees, giving shape to the Malay Kampong that looks over the port and Flying Fish Cove.

I love the old photographs of the residences at Flying Fish Cove—the stilted homes amongst the palm trees lining the curve of the bay. I did not realise until recently, reading accounts of the Flying Fish Cove landslides, that in the 1930s Flying Fish Cove also contained European homes. Known as the 'Edinburgh' settlement, these expansive, colonial pieces of architecture occupied the eastern end of the bay while the Malay community inhabited the westernmost end. This juxtaposition surprised me, and I went on to read how the side-by-sideness of the cultures living here led to moments of integration amongst the island's inhabitants, especially evident in the children as they played together on the cove's foreshore, the white children learning Malay from their amahs. In fact, Malay became the most commonly spoken language for basic communication at this time, I imagine due to the simplicity of the Malay's grammatical structure, borne as a result of its roots as

an ancient trading language used in the ports of South-East Asia. I am continually kept on my toes out here in the Indian Ocean Territories—in this unique world, race relations are never as simple as they first seem.

With a few exceptions, the Kampong is now almost exclusively Malay. I pull into the carpark by the water under the Barringtonia, where these box fruit trees have scattered their enormous, pink and white pom-pom flowers along the bay. From here I can see the beautiful shape of the mosque's minaret, a small tower with a golden, curved roof, its shape mirrored in the pointed, silver decorations installed above the mosque's windows. Behind, the hillside pushes up steeply, turning into a high cliff, a layered wall of complex greenery.

I walk up the stairs to the Malay Club restaurant feeling a bit tense. I am outside my comfort zone, both in my unfamiliarity with the space—the Kampong was a place I rarely visited on the island (the restaurant was closed during the time I had lived here)—but also because I am interviewing a senior religious figure in the community. As I step onto the deck, Malay music plays loudly from inside the Club, where several women in pale and patterned tudungs are preparing food, the delicious smells of makan filling the air. I am washed in a wave of language for me far more suggestive of the Cocos Islands than Christmas Island, yet the familiarity of the Malay dialect helps me feel a little more at ease. By the sliding door that leads into the restaurant, an older man and his female companion lean against the glass, laughing quietly and chatting in what sounds like Cantonese.

I am a few minutes early, so I take a seat and attempt to look comfortable sitting on my own at the back of the restaurant while all around me people joke and talk. The smells of kretek cigarettes and cleaning products waft toward me in alternate, dissonant waves. A waiter comes out and delivers milkshake glasses full of sweet, cold tea to a group of people. I look out toward a nearby apartment block painted a shade of pale pink, where a woman hangs out her washing on the small verandah of her flat. To my left, children happily play in the mosque's shade.

I made sure I dressed appropriately for the meeting, clothing covering my shoulders and knees and, while I wait, I wonder if there are any other protocols I may need to consider. I draw on my experiences of relating to elders of the Islamic community on the atoll, and remember the horror in one nenek's face on Home

Island when I went to hug her husband as we were leaving Cocos to move back to the mainland, her reluctance to let me even shake her husband's hand. I decide it is probably appropriate that as a woman, I do not touch Zainal. I will avoid shaking his hand, I think to myself, to make it easier for us both. I keep looking up over the grass, past the mosque, to see if I can see a man in a white thobe and prayer cap, as I nervously ensure I have enough pens and check the battery level on my recorder.

'Ah, you are already working before we even start the interview!' I hear a voice say.

Much to my surprise, I look up to see Zainal coming around the corner wearing steel capped boots, navy Hard Yakka work pants and a collared shirt with yellow high-viz panels. Taken aback, I realise Zainal must work on the mines, still the island's main employer, and that he must be meeting me during his lunch break. Zainal smiles and shakes my hand warmly, which throws me even more, and I quickly try to adjust my preconceptions of my interviewee as we walk across the grass to a picnic table beside the mosque on the other side of the lawn. I like Zainal's choice of location, away from the noise and music of the restaurant, but where we can still catch glimpses of ocean between the apartment buildings. Despite the wind interfering with my recordings (which I counter with a bag placed on the windward side), I can see people physically relax when they are interviewed outside, and both the interviewee and I can look up and out at the island or the ocean, and remember exactly where, and what, we are talking about.

Zainal must be in his late forties, perhaps early fifties, though it is hard to tell as the Malay population on Christmas Island, with their olive and often unfurrowed skin, can appear younger than their chronological age. Zainal is lean and sports a head of thick, wavy, black hair. His face is as open and unassuming as I remember, but in this much less harrowing context his mouth breaks easily into a smile. His movements are fluid, almost laconic, his body language depicting a man down to earth, relaxed and at ease with himself. As I set up my microphone, he buys us both a drink of juice in a tetra pack. When he returns, I ask him to sign the interview permissions and paperwork, which he does seeming somewhat bemused, politely asking me for a second time how I got his number.

Once I have set my bag up to divert the wind, I start my recorder, and we both laugh, self-conscious at the seeming formality of the moment.

'Well, let's start at the beginning,' I say, asking Zainal how he came to be on the island. Zainal tells me that he was born on Christmas Island—his father came from Malaysia to work on the mines, while his mother came from Indonesia. Zainal's wife, Farida, came to Christmas Island as a nurse from Singapore. Farida was the Malay teacher when I was living on Christmas Island, a self-assured and intelligent woman, consistently striking in her colourful headscarves tied in a knot at the back of her head, out the front of which large, looped earrings would glint in light. I imagine them courting, a striking, good-looking couple, the attraction between them still palpable in Zainal's voice as he speaks of her all these years later.

'She was twenty when she came,' Zainal says, 'we met and became friends and got on, you know...I was still at school…' he laughs, trails off. 'We got married sometime in the 1980s.'

We go on to talk about his family history on the island a little more. Zainal's face shows traces of emotion when he briefly speaks about the tough living and working conditions he witnessed his parents endure during the days his father was employed on the phosphate mine. 'It was very tough, then,' Zainal says quietly, looking away, then he moves the conversation on.

Zainal's parents left the island after the mine closed in December 1987, taking the resettlement scheme offered by the Australian Government as they tried to depopulate the remote territory. Zainal stayed until the mine reopened, the couple living off Farida's wage, as by this time Farida had already started teaching.

'Selamat Siang!' I hear someone call, and turn to find Nek Su—my Cocos interviewee-to-be and 'Old Man of the Sea'—wave as he goes to prepare for prayers.

'Siang, Nek!' I laugh in surprise. Neither of us, I suspect, would have thought we would bump into each other here. Zainal and Nek Su exchange more greetings in Malay that I do not understand, punctuated with much laughter.

‘Jumpa lagi, Mak Greta,’ Nek calls warmly (my Cocos name meaning, literally, ‘Mother of Greta’), then goes off to wash before he enters the mosque, and Zainal turns back to me, still smiling.

‘It is good to be so close together here,’ Zainal tells me, ‘it is just like one big family. Some people say “Oh it is too close and everybody is right next to each other,”’ he laughs, ‘but I think it is good. It is the best place to bring up the kids, they are so happy here with the opportunity to mix with everyone and the parents don’t have to worry where they go or who they are with because everybody knows each other.’

I turn the conversation to questions about Zainal’s faith and his role in the community. Zainal tells me that being President of the Islamic Council is only meant to be a two-year role, but he has been asked to continue on into his fifth year. Zainal tells me does not mind the responsibility as he is passionate about his community, but hopes one day to see a member of the next generation in the role.

I think about watching the sunset down at Flying Fish Cove, and the silence through which the call to prayer used to travel in waves over the water. I ask Zainal if he has experienced any prejudice from other islanders toward the Muslim population.

‘No, not so far. Being Christmas Island, we ignore that,’ he says with a characteristic shrug and grin. ‘We continue on, we have our own way of life. People have their own point of view, but not in an aggressive way, just “Oh that is your view, that’s fine, that’s how you feel”.’

‘But what about the call to prayer, Zainal?’ I ask. ‘That was one of my favourite memories, hearing the sound travel over the sea. Were the mainland tensions toward Islam the reason that the call to prayer is not being played at sunset anymore? Did those prejudices make their way over here?’

‘Oh, that,’ Zainal answers, ‘no, that’s just because the audio is broken. Actually I must fix that, I keep forgetting. It has been a few weeks now.’ I laugh in relief and at myself reading so much into a technical issue. With the obvious exception of attitudes toward asylum seekers, the ‘live and let live’ attitude of most Christmas Islanders was something I really enjoyed and respected. To know the

mutual tolerance and acceptance of diversity amongst most islanders is still intact is very reassuring.

I decide to venture into a question I had always wanted to ask when I lived in the Christmas Island community, and ask Zainal if he ever wished there was more integration between the white, Chinese and Malay populations.

'I like the different, the distinct communities,' Zainal answers. 'There is harmony, when there is a big event we all join together. I suppose it has maintained our culture, otherwise it gets too mixed. It gets to a stage maybe in two or three generations that you tend to lose step with your culture, so it is good that everyone looks after their own community and when we come together as an island, we celebrate. I think that is important.'

Zainal's answer surprises me. I always had thought of integration as something inherently good, presuming that the Malay community wished the white community would make more of an effort to mix. Now I see that for Zainal, in his leadership role, the distinctness of the communities helps him maintain the cultural integrity of the Christmas-Malay people.

Zainal tells me that the current generation of young people are mature and responsible, but when the island's casino was in operation, it caused a lot of challenges for the Islamic community, with large numbers of people flying in and out and the increase in the availability of alcohol. Zainal tells me that it is part of his role to look after the community so, at this time, he and other members of the Kampong began to meet regularly with police so any problems could be quickly addressed. Though things have settled with the casino's closure, and the new generation of young people have a greater connection to the mosque and their Islamic inheritance, the strong links and regular meetings with the police have been maintained.

The conversation shifts to Zainal's own children, who have now moved to boarding schools on the mainland to finish their education, beginning with their daughter Farzian receiving a scholarship in Perth. He tells me Farzian and her sister were horrified when Zainal and Farida suggested moving to Perth to be closer to them, the girls adamant that they wanted to maintain their connection with Christmas Island, made possible by returning to see their parents in the holidays.

Thinking of the way the family now straddles their lives between mainland Australia and Christmas Island, I ask Zainal if considers himself to be foremost a Christmas Islander or an Australian. He laughs. 'If we talk with islanders, we are Christmas Islanders,' Zainal says, 'but I consider myself an Australian because of one thing: our Australian Citizenship. In time that is going to be our future for our kids.'

'And what do you hope for the future of the Christmas Island community?' I ask. Zainal tells me that he wants his daughters to be able to come back and find work, for the operations of the mines to continue.

'I am hoping it will give us another twenty years so that another generation can have the employment and will stay on the island and enjoy what I am enjoying now.' I look at Zainal's face, his dusty, high-viz work wear, the sense of calm he seems to inhabit, a deep pleasure in his way of being in the world. I had never thought of the mining industry as something giving Christmas Island vitality and holding the community together, only saw the devastation the extraction of phosphate wrought on the tropical ecosystem, the moonscape the mines left behind. Zainal's statement throws up an inner conflict in me, but I just try to stay with him, try to really think about what the phosphate mines mean for him and the Christmas-Malay people.

I start to become aware that the interview has been going for well over an hour and realise that Zainal must need to get back to work, though there is so much I would still like to ask him.

'Before we finish,' I say, 'let me ask you about the sea.' I tell Zainal that I had first become aware of him at the memorial service for the SIEV 221, that I was deeply moved by his speech and the stories he shared. Though I worry I am being intrusive, I really feel the need to ask Zainal if continuing to live overlooking such a perilous site for so many people still impacts on him, whether he is still troubled by his memories of that day.

'I didn't think it had any impact on me,' Zainal says, 'but then after a while the reality just dropped, tears every time someone mentioned it. It doesn't really have me mentally ill, you know, but it's a tragedy. I have friends who have suffered, who still have those memories, but I don't have that. Though when you start talking about it, it flicks pictures up in my mind.'

I want to ask Zainal more about this, but I get the feeling my wish to go over what took place during the time of the boat tragedy is not a need Zainal shares. Zainal no longer seems troubled by the topic nor particularly interested in continuing to talk about it. I sense he has reached a peace with what took place and managed to leave the memory of the boat tragedy largely behind. I am amazed to see the calm in his face after witnessing the initial impact of his experience of so much trauma. I leave space, but Zainal does not elaborate, so I decide to leave the topic be.

'Do you think the way the ocean is always present here affects how you experience your life?' I ask.

'The sea is why I decide to stay,' Zainal answers. 'In fact, from my verandah you can see the water.' As Zainal speaks about his lifelong connection with the ocean, I visualise his day through the lens of his swimming goggles, watching the fish dart through bright fingers of coral in the early morning, see him tying his dinghy out at the buoys in the bay in the still of night. Not to fish, just to sit. The calm. The space. The quiet. I can see how out there in the lightless enormity of water, an expansiveness beyond horizon, how cares could relent to the dark, liquid lull; how there might be enough air to let each worry float up and out, dissipating into a vast, star-rich sky.

13

Walking Backwards toward Light

Driving back to the cottage after interviewing Zainal, I feel an enormous sense of wellbeing wash over me, a distinct sensation that both in my being here, as well as through these conversations, something in me is beginning to soften, to heal. This is strange, because I did not know Zainal at all during my time on Christmas Island, nor was our conversation intense or particularly emotional. *What is it?* I wonder. *What exactly is happening here?*

I make myself some lunch and then flip open my laptop, sitting in the cool air of the air-conditioner, skimming over emails and social media sites. An article an advocacy group has posted catches my attention and I click on the bold heading that reads, 'The Nauru Files: cache of 2000 leaked reports reveal scale of abuse of children in offshore detention' above an image of children whose faces are obscured, standing behind wire. Suddenly feel myself tense and recoil, a sick feeling rising in my stomach. As I skim the screen, it becomes clear that the report released by the *Guardian* newspaper contains over two thousand files of documented claims of abuse of asylum seekers in detention on Nauru, a 'client state' of the Australian Government and an offshore island where our nation continues to detain asylum seekers who arrive in Australian waters.

Amongst the two thousand files, more than half of the claims in the report are about abuses alleged against children. As I continue to read, the 'Nauru Files' reveal details of children self-harming, receiving death threats and being violently assaulted as well as sexually abused. In 2011, when I was teaching children detained on Christmas Island, I was required to count in and out scissors and sharpeners so my students didn't self-harm with school equipment. At this time, I remember thinking surely our nation had hit a moral rock-bottom, but it seems now, five years later, we have discovered a whole new level of low, a darkening of our collective conscience.

I find the synchronicity of the report's release coinciding with the week I have returned to this complex and beautiful place striking. Accompanying the report is a video, which I click on and wait in 'island time' for the internet to upload the file. Once the video is uploaded, I find myself unexpectedly listening to teachers who worked on Nauru speaking of their deep affection for the children they met then, watching these same students start to drown in the tedium of detention and self-harming, the clearly emotional workers' struggle with their sense of powerlessness in it all. I am awed by the courage of these women in the face of the *Border Force Act*, but the tremor in the teachers' voices is a sound I know, and I am caught off-guard.

It is sometimes difficult to remember the day-to-day detail of what it was like teaching children in detention after five years, but hearing the heartbreak of the educators employed by the Red Cross, reading their faces, images and memories start to flood in. I dig into my bag next to the couch and rummage around for my external hard drive. I plug it in and begin searching amongst my files for a submission I made to the *Forgotten Children* report in 2013. The *Forgotten Children* report was a damning document submitted to the Australian Parliament by the Human Rights Commission in 2014. It reported on a ten-month investigation into eleven Australian-funded detention centres revealing the widespread sexual assault, self-harm and severe mental disorders in child detainees.

I find the file with my submission and open it, looking at the photos I had taken as evidence and read my answers to the Inquiry's questions, remembering my fear of the possible consequences over what I had revealed. Though I had ticked the box for my submission to remain confidential, my deep concern regarding what my actions would mean for my relationships with people on the islands and whether it would affect my ability in the future to return to a place I loved was real.

As I read through my comments, I am consumed by memories and emotions that are hard to confront or contain[12]:

[12] For a more extended excerpt of the transcript of my submission to the *Forgotten Children* report, please see Appendix 3.

Witnessing the effect detention had on children on Christmas Island was one of the most confronting experiences I have ever had. I really thought that as a nation we cared about the Rights of the Child, but my experiences over the three years I was in the Indian Ocean Territories showed me a very different picture. Children came off boats full of joy and hope, they would sing, laugh, play and joke. What I found would happen within two, three, four months, let alone when it was over a year, is that children began to shut down. Some students stopped wanting to eat, others would not sing or play, and one intelligent and articulate six-year-old student, who had thrown her arms around me in gestures of warmth and happiness when she first arrived, in the end would sit at the entry to the detention centre rocking slightly with a vacant look in her eye, barely acknowledging my or other people's presence. Though I don't know what happened to this student, I feel deeply concerned that she may not recover her natural joy and wonder at life, and instead had entered into a world marked by depression and disconnection.

Although on the surface most students seemed completely fine, while working with asylum seeker children it became clear through their artwork and conversations that many had experienced incredible trauma. Staff were given little to no training in knowing how to respond to students who had had these experiences. I felt most staff that worked with asylum seekers were inadequately trained to meet their needs, especially as many had come from working in the prison system. One upsetting example I witnessed of this was a member of staff shouting at a child for not lining up properly. That student had recently attended the funeral of his own parents who drowned after the sinking of the SIEV 221.

And then…

My main concern is actually for the unaccompanied minors that I taught. In the absence of families, these students formed strong friendships, which I imagine helped to fill the gap the absence of families created. It was not

> uncommon when returning students to their detention facilities to have the Serco officers meet them at the gate arbitrarily separate them (they would say 'right you and you there, you lot over there — you lot pack up your stuff, you're leaving'). It was distressing to see the seeming arbitrariness of who was going and staying, and the complete insensitivity to breaking up friendship groups for these young men. It was all they had. To see the distress on their faces was heartbreaking. I don't know if they even got to say goodbye to each other.

And finally:

> In 2010 Julia Gillard promised to have all children out of detention by July 2011. Since that time, we have not only failed to ensure that children are not imprisoned, but we have sent them to countries where they are even more vulnerable, out the eye of the media and human rights groups.
>
> Working with asylum seeker children on Christmas Island was the most rewarding job I have ever had, but I was unable to sustain my work on Christmas Island as I was unsupported in my role and deeply affected by the suffering I witnessed around me. Much of this suffering was an unnecessary result of placing children in detention, where they are unable to have normal relationships and experiences and are deprived of the sensory stimuli that encourage brain development. There is no doubt in my mind that we are deliberately, even if indirectly or covertly, punishing children for seeking safety in Australia and this is a very bleak statement about our moral integrity as a nation.

All the powerlessness I experienced as a teacher on the islands rushes back and, alone in this place, I find I have no means to guard against it. Sitting in the walls of my accommodation, I feel raw, broken, the sense of immediacy in the memories the report has conjured betrays the fact that years have passed between the time that I taught asylum seeker children and now. I sit in silence wondering how to hold

onto the weight of what I know, how to respond. An old rage stirs in the memory of my muscles, a surge of anger at my own impotence, that there still seems to be nothing I can do to prevent the tide of pointless suffering that I witnessed here, and that clearly continues elsewhere, on other islands. Things have not improved for asylum seekers for all my and others' lobbying, protesting, submission and letter writing; instead things have got so much worse.

With a new resolve, I stand up. I know I cannot afford to avoid it anymore. I shut my computer, turn off the air-con and get back into the car, making my way to the top of the island, toward Phosphate Hill. As I drive along the main street through Settlement, I can hear the frigatebirds, the clatter of their calls as though coming through a long pipe, the way the sound curls in my ear. Turning up the slope toward Poon Saan, golden bosunbirds trail their opulent tails over the car's roof, but the day is clouded now, so their flash of brilliant colour is muted. I pass the Poon Saan shops then turn left, put the car in first as it starts the steep ascent up the slope, past the hospital on my left, climbing until the car reaches the top of the hill and a signpost points right, its white letters against deep blue reading 'Refuse Centre' and 'Sports Ground'. Though the Detention Centre at Phosphate Hill spills out over both sides of the road, there was never any signage to point people in its direction nor any wording to indicate the camp even existed.

The time I spent at the Phosphate Hill family detention centre is a memory I have needed to come at slowly, like walking backwards toward a light that is searing, a place I have needed to inch toward in increments, glimpsing the turnoff to the camp like a hook in flesh as I raced past. Driving in now, I can almost hear the young men's footfalls as the students crossed the road from their accommodation in Construction camp to the huddle of dongas in the Charlie compound that formed our makeshift classrooms. I drive in at walking speed as layers of faces and experiences fall and settle gently on my head and shoulders, pushing through skin, pulsing in my blood. On my left I see an area cordoned off with the bright bodies of life-rafts, then beyond that the rows of dongas that formed the Charlie compound. I keep driving to the end of the road, pulling over at the Cricket Club. I immediately attract the attention of two men sitting there, so I round the cul-de-sac a little more until I am out of sight, park the car and grab my camera.

This would have been a risky move a few years ago, but the detention centre now sits like a ghost town, beige and rusting behind pool fencing and cyclone wire. Shade cloth designed to screen the walkways from the eyes of media and passers-by has begun to rot and fall away in great swathes. Beyond the fence, row upon row of dongas sit above the red-brown soil; in the distance dense jungle obscures views of the ocean. As I photograph the detention site, I hear a car come around the cul-de-sac and slow behind me. I feel my body tense, sense that I am being watched and, for a moment, an old guilt, an old fear, comes over me. A man in hi-vis wear comes out of the toilets at the back of the Club, sees me with my camera and takes out his phone and makes a call. But despite the islanders' seeming defensive reactions to my presence, I am not a threat. Phosphate Hill detention centre has been closed for over a year. There is nothing for anyone to defend anymore, no shroud of secrecy to be maintained. Just stillness where this interface between the community and asylum seekers was once was the source of tumult and anger, tension and resentment. Now there is only absence, space and silence.

At first, the sight of the compound fills me with sadness as well as a familiar, vague sense of stress at being watched. Then I experience a shift—I realise with a sudden thrill that for the first time I am on this island on my own terms. I notice my shoulders have rounded, drawing me into myself, so I consciously push them back. I raise my body up and stand straight. I don't need to be accepted here, this is no longer my home, I am only here for ten days. I feel myself expand, take up space. I step up, step into the right to be where I am in this moment, the right to tell my own story. I feel a deep need to make sense of what has happened to me and others in this place, to understand my forever-altered life, and this detention centre has everything to do with who I have become.

Living in the Christmas Island community, the pressure to turn a blind eye, to keep things light was oppressive, like a great gravity making this small world stay in the orbit of the status quo, though the dark underbelly of nationalism simmered and boiled at the periphery of our vision. But this time I find I have the confidence of not only my sense of connection to this powerful place through body and memory, but the newly found freedom of being someone just passing through.

I look out across the tennis courts that were annexed to Construction camp and find myself unexpectedly filled with a rush of happiness. In March 2011, only days after rioting at the North West Point Detention Centre saw police open fire on asylum seekers with rubber ('bean bag') bullets and tear gas, the families at the Phosphate Hill detention site rallied to try to create as normal as possible an environment for the children imprisoned there. A massive Persian New Year celebration was organised, also known as Nowruz, and at the last minute I was asked to come along. Looking through the cyclone fencing I can clearly visualise the scene. Over a basic table had been laid many offerings, symbols of hope for the new year: sweet, dried fruit for love, green sprouts for renewal, apples for beauty and health, garlic for self-care, vinegar for wisdom and patience. Nowruz, a time to let go of sadness and hardship, a time to wipe the slate clean.

I remember being surrounded by one or perhaps two hundred people on this small court, then without its net, and the incredibly warm welcome extended to me by my students' parents. I felt as though I were a guest of honour: the joy and excitement of teacher and parent finally meeting was clearly deeply reciprocal, the sheer humanity of us being face to face. The students took my hands and dragged me from adult conversation onto the improvised dance floor where we moved and laughed by candlelight, me sweating heavily under my cardigan, but reluctant to remove it and expose my shoulders lest I risk offence, when my hosts had been so generous. In the corner a pasty Serco guard slumped in a plastic chair tried her hardest not to seem interested, pushed down the corners of her mouth that, despite her best efforts to control her face, still seemed to want to break into a smile.

I remember the whirling Afghan dancers, the call and response in the moves of large groups of Iranian men and women, but most of all I remember the young men. In tight jeans and brandishing coloured silk scarves, the Iranian men were flamboyant and breathtakingly sensual, arching their muscular bodies and circling their hips in a way I have never seen men move before. I felt a strange sense of gender role-reversal watching this highly charged and sexualised performance, yet it was a dance also overtly playful and teasing, the men vying to outdo each other and court the women's—and perhaps the even the men's—gaze.

Now an afternoon haze hangs over the carpark and there is no trace of the lives crammed into this small nexus from different parts of the globe. I follow the fencing, cross the road and walk toward the site of the old school. The car that had pulled in behind me has gone now, the man with his phone has joined his friends at the club, and everything in me has gone quiet, become finely tuned to this moment.

I walk to the security checkpoint at the front of the Charlie camp. To the left I can see the mounted spotlights and high wire fencing—the barbed wire since removed—around the compound where they had detained the asylum seekers who had arrived after the announcement of the Gillard Government's proposed (but never realised) Malaysia Solution. The people inside were not permitted to leave the small space or mix with other detainees, nor the children able to receive any schooling. I remember the strange young guard who checked our ID, searched through our bags and teaching equipment, gave us our identity tags, took our phones and signed us in. In particular, I remember his strange personal empowerment speak, as he read self-help books through his long days in the tiny room guarding the compound, the way I nodded and smiled, with my phone stashed in my underpants, later photographing what I saw with a slight shake in my hands.

Today I can see there are workers on ride-on mowers moving through the grounds, so though the gate is unlocked, I decide not go in. Signs affixed to the detention centre boundary read 'NO TRESPASSING—*IT IS AN OFFENCE UNDER SECTION 81 OF THE CRIMES ACT FOR PERSONS TO ENTER OR REMAIN ON THIS LAND WITHOUT LAWFUL CAUSE.'* More buildings have been erected since the time I had worked at Phosphate Hill so it is difficult to make out which dongas were the classrooms where I taught. The spaces where we played sport and ate lunch do not exist or are no longer visible. I experience a moment of bleak irony as, peering in between the fence posts, I see that a child's playground has finally been erected, standing new, bright and unused in the centre of the camp.

Initially I had taught children between the ages of six and nine who had been bussed from this centre to the island's school. My role at the school had begun in February 2011, only weeks after the Christmas Island boat tragedy. The air had hung heavy over the island or, perhaps more accurately, had sat like a silent

reservoir beneath us all. I had felt up against it, waded against the weight of it, but life went on.

As the young children were frequently and suddenly transferred, there was no roll for me to check. I chose a child to count the bags for morning tea, then we would count each other, and that was the way we would know we are all there. The young students were Iranian and Afghan, many from the Hazara minority group fleeing ethnic cleansing in Afghanistan. The Hazara children were gentle and wide-eyed. The Iranian children were the opposite of everything I had expected from a refugee. Urban, bold and educated, I had not anticipated I would need such a quick wit to hold my own with students who had just made such a dangerous journey. Rather than trying to control this spirited group, I learnt to go with them, to become playful too. I taught them the Hokey Pokey: 'You put your arm in, you put your arm out,' we sang, enjoying our new song and building on our English. I demonstrated the actions to the line, 'You put your bottom in, you put your bottom out.' Mouths and eyes open wide, the children stared at me speechless. Finally, I had outdone them! I laughed and showed them again. Through such a simple song, a light-hearted act, despite the oppressive regimes many of the students had fled they began to understand that in this space we were safe. These were bodies with which we could move and play and, in doing so, find a way past fear and shame. With each new boat the children passed this message on to each other, teaching their classmates the Hokey Pokey in a strange rite of passage we came to love.

I put my students' work into the newsletter: a six-year-old's painting of being rescued by the Navy, the Australian flag like a sun on her horizon. Another student depicted her garden in Iran in lush, bright lines. I scribed their proud sentences of newly acquired English to include as captions underneath the pieces of work. Nikoo's words read: 'First of all I painted a blue colour for the sea, there is a fish in it. There are little boats and there is something wrong with them and the Navy is coming to help them. I have drawn mountains with a sun, this is the Australian flag.' Beneath Fatemah's flowers, I also pasted her words, 'My painting is about the farming in our village where we used to live. We had some flowers in our garden that is why I painted flowers. Next door to our house there was a yard with

two big flowers. There is a butterfly next to the tree, she is flying to sit on the flowers.'

The day after the newsletter went to print I was called into the office. The deputy principal tells me there has been a mistake, that it is not to happen again. I am told if I want to include my student's work in the newsletter, I will have to speak to an administrator first. I understand they are telling me my students' work is not to appear in the newsletter again. I walk away confused. I was doing what I always did as a teacher, including my children's work in the newsletter so they had a sense of a tangible audience, a motivation and purpose for acquiring and applying language skills. This had always encouraged by my principals, yet here I suddenly felt like I had done something wrong, that I was being somehow provocative. At staff gatherings, on my lunch break, even socialising away from work, it was becoming clear that my day was not to be mentioned, the students were not to be mentioned. My class full of children bursting with life was not to be spoken of, never to be named.

Around halfway through my time on Christmas Island, there were fewer young children arriving by boat, so I started to teach the older, mostly male, unaccompanied minors inside the family detention centre at Phosphate Hill. These were older students and young adults whose families had saved and borrowed money to send the young men on their own to Australia to find a better life, or often in the hope of saving their lives. Like the younger children, these students were also predominately from Iran, Iraq and Afghanistan, and though they were in their teens and early twenties, they laughed and went along with my will to sing through our days. We wrote poetry, scribed reports, played cricket, made pikelets and recycled paper as we built on our varied levels of English.

Yet in the walls of these rusted, aging buildings are sad memories too: the young Hazara teenager broken-hearted at his separation from his mother, placing a love heart with 'I Miss You' on his sheet of newly made paper; a struggling Iranian teenager sitting by the perimeter fence desperately needing to be alone, me insisting the student join the class out of my fear he may try to self-harm if I left him unsupervised. The holes in the floor, the broken tables and computers. The unspoken question of missing funding. But of all these memories, there is one

moment in which I felt my world as I had known it finally fracture, like a fault-line rippling at speed between what had happened before and the choices I made after, where the border between 'me' and the 'you' of asylum seekers, warped and finally dissolved and I felt myself becoming porous, my future no longer wholly separable from the fate of those young men who shared their lives with me.

Beneath the pandanas, the young men are already waiting, many in matching polo shirts, all in white Dunlop sneakers. 'Thirty-seven today,' the guard says. 'Hossein is having his interview and Ali N. is at Medical.' Someone writes this down on a form attached to a clipboard then the group divides itself into three as teachers and assistants walk toward their rooms. In the class I am working in, Barb is running an extension program for the students who already have a degree of English and have attended school in their country of origin.

'Hello, good morning,' the boys greet us, 'how are you this morning?'

'Very well, thank you,' I say, 'and you?'

We all enunciate clearly, feel the staccato consonants and wide vowel sounds slide around our mouths as we form our immaculate sentences. I like the students' playfulness and warmth. Some smile shyly then look away, others, like Mehdi, seem to be constantly performing. Loud and boisterous, wearing a thick, gold chain and bright orange t-shirt, this Iranian-born student likes his English raw and raucous, but he is always respectful. Like his friends, he is grateful to be here, grateful for something to do to break up the monotony of his life in detention. There are hundreds of asylum seekers crammed into this makeshift camp, originally built to house workers building the North West Point detention centre, and only a handful of places at the school. While the students remain imprisoned in the country they long to be a part of, these young men are at least able to build their English language skills in the time that they are here. The students can feel this is a new beginning, however different from the one they had dreamed of.

Some of the students and I are working in small groups on a project called 'Thonglines[13]', while Barb takes a majority of the class. This involves the students writing about their journeys in short poetic forms, so we can scribe our creative works onto the blank sole of one of the thongs that regularly wash up on the island. The thongs are going be used to create a collaborative artwork for display. I have gathered scores of these colourful and discarded pieces of footwear, combing the island's few beaches.

For me, each rescued piece has become a layered metaphor, something lost or discarded, turning up on the unlikely landfall of this tiny island. The thongs scattering otherwise pristine beaches are confronting and we don't want to acknowledge them, yet each piece has made a long journey, been sculpted and changed by their time at sea, to arrive at this chance intersection in our lives. Each thong has a unique imprint, a life and story pressed into its sole. Wound together with wire, carved with knives into pieces of art, broken or barely worn, each piece comes like a floating question. When laid together alongside others, the thongs become beautiful, both in the synchronicity of the form and in their diversity.

In the preceding days, I have run something of a crash course in short forms of poetry, focusing on haiku. Many of the Iranian and Afghan students have come from a tradition steeped in verse, a life lived in the heart of Persia. The challenge is not the form, but the language, the only translators being the students themselves. We have Farsi to English dictionaries, English to Farsi dictionaries, Dari to English dictionaries, and thesauruses. We draw, we mime and laugh—we make do, and the poems they produce are startling in their pared back facts, both banal and profound in their raw expressions.

Students are transferred off the island suddenly and without notice, before I can record many of their names, or before they can paint their hard-earned words. I type these students' poems up at home, print and paste what they wished to say on the best thongs, on the brightest or the most beautifully sea-formed. Day to day we

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[13] For more information on the Thonglines project, listen to the ABC interview at: http://www.abc.net.au/local/photos/2011/07/05/3261737.htm?site=perth&xml=3261737-mediarss.xml#bigpicturepos

do not know which students will remain in the class, so I work harder, faster, try larger groups, to help as many students as I can to finish. Today in my rounds, I had missed one student, now I notice he is struggling. I see him hunched over his desk, paper on one side, pink thong on the other. He stares at his page.

'Do you need a hand?' I ask. The student looks up, still curled over his grey, plastic desk.

'Ah, maybe.' he says. 'I am not sure.' I look at the stark sheet of computer paper the young man is curled over, see he has written two lines.

'Do you mind if I have a look?' I ask, and the student sits up and passes his sheet of paper to me. I wonder if he is new in this class, and whether he is finding the task overwhelming. Though grouped according to their competence in English, the students still represent a huge range of abilities within each class, and their experiences of schooling can be very varied. 'What is your name?' I ask.

'Mohammed,' the student replies. 'I am from Afghanistan.' Mohammed is lean with dark hair and pale skin. He appears young, perhaps fifteen or sixteen. His eyes look intently at mine, then back at the page. There, in shaky handwriting, are written the words;

The sound of firing
many people fall down.

I know I am out of my depth, and do not wish to press students beyond what they are wanting to say, nor beyond what I am able to constructively respond to. None of the staff are given any specific training or support while working with asylum seekers, so we often feel like we are flying by the seat of our pants. I look back at Mohammed, holding the half-formed poem between us.

'That is very powerful,' I say, 'and very sad. Do you want to just paint the words, or would you like to include an illustration with your work?'

Mohammed looks intently at me, like he is searching for something, so I wait in the silence next to him, wait for him to find his words.

'I am sorry,' he says, 'my English is not very good.'

'That's okay', I smile warmly back at him, 'that's what I am here for.'

Mohammed smiles weakly back at me, but he is unsettled, and I am not sure what he wants.

'Can I ask you something?' he says finally.

'Of course.'

Mohammed picks up his ballpoint pen and begins to draw quickly, in rapid movements, onto a piece of lined paper. I am intrigued, wonder at what it is that seems to be so pressing, pushing him up against all the challenges in his ability to simply say. On his page he draws a picture of people in a park, some holding something.

'The women and the children, they go to the park. It was a graveyard, but they are playing cricket there,' he tells me, and begins drawing again in rapid, small strokes. I watch. I wait. He is drawing a truck, there is a door on the back of the truck and it is open. He draws men coming out on a ramp of the back of the truck, he gives them guns. He begins repeatedly pointing with the tip of his pen at the men at the back of the truck.

'Please can you tell me?' Mohammed asks,' because I cannot understand. I just say to you as one person asks another so I can understand my life, what happened.'

'Sure,' I say. I hold his gaze.

'The men,' he points again at the blue figures at the back of the truck, 'they jump out of the truck and they shoot all the women and the children in the park. I just stand there, but all around me the people fall down, crying, dead, dying everywhere. Why? Can you tell me, why did this happen, I don't understand? Can you tell me why they did this? How can this be allowed to happen?'

Mohammed's eyes look deeply into mine. He waits. He wants me to give him something to make sense of what he cannot hold. I want to ask if the men were white, but I don't. I stay with his question. I try to find something, I dig deep in the silence, will not flinch, will not play it down.

'I am so sorry,' I say eventually, while I feel a strange ripping through sensation my body, something in me is starting to give, to break open. The day turns silent. 'I don't know why. That is terrible. I don't know why.' We sit together

with the weight of his question while the class moves and whirls around us. He nods.

‘What should I write for my last line?’ he asks eventually. I look back at his poem.

‘Well, what happened after the people fell down?’

‘I was just standing there.’

‘Then that is what we need to write,’ I say. Mohammed adds his last line and we read the poem in silence, together:

The sound of firing
many people fall down
but still I stood there.

‘I think that is it, I think you should leave it like that, Mohammed, perhaps just a comma after ‘still’. Well done, that’s a strong poem.’ Mohammed curls back over his desk and adds the comma. I stand up, see another student with his hand in the air.

I turn my gaze from the demountables at the Charlie compound and look out toward the remnant rainforest at the camp’s periphery. Life in the Phosphate Hill detention centre was a struggle and many students were scarred by unimaginable trauma. Yet even so, for me, the glow of the pared back, deeply honest nature of our relationships still pushed through the dark details of many of the young men’s lives. The students appeared to me as luminous, the sense of their irrepressible humanity shone around me, their sheer will for vitality. In the time we spent together, our classrooms were filled with playfulness and drama, our laughter becoming a shared language, yet as their teacher, I was consistently treated with respect and kindness. Despite the often-overwhelming nature of my work teaching in detention, standing here, I can’t but help feel I was gifted something priceless and I am filled with emotion and a deep sense of gratitude.

The council workers have finished mowing and are packing away their gear. There is nothing more to see, so I turn to leave. Without the students' bustle and energy, the buildings suddenly seem cold, lifeless, so I walk back to the car and drive away from Phosphate Hill, heading back down the steeply sloping road toward Poon Saan. The ocean curves improbably high on the horizon, the rainforest arches over me, soft and green. As I drive I feel an incredible sense of peace, of calm, yet I feel the soft sorrow that takes the shape of loss, the absence of each of the faces of so many young men I knew so briefly but so intimately, our lives meeting for a month, a week, a day.

14

An Island of Hungry Ghosts

Apples, oranges, hand towels, fake money, pressed shirts, coloured flags, sweet biscuits, plain crackers and a pile of twenty or thirty new pairs of shoes. This is what it takes to placate the dead during the Festival of the Hungry Ghost. I walk around the small mountain of goods contained by black plastic bags and cardboard boxes in the front courtyard of the Poon Saan Club, a 1950s-style building of stark concrete softened by an entry of architectural curves that forms a nexus of the Chinese community on Christmas Island.

Alongside these items are two large, wooden tables adorned with an array of rectangular, metal catering trays containing delicious-looking Asian dishes covered in plastic wrap, each pierced with ten or so sticks of incense. As I walk around the remarkable scene, a woman moves toward a third, smaller table that is lined on the right side by a row of bowls. Each bowl is piled high with white rice, skewered with a lit stick of incense and accompanied by a large plastic spoon, a small container of what looks like dark sauce, and a teacup. An enormous silver tea pot sits off to one side. Behind the tea pot, a red container filled with sand has been placed in which large maroon and silver joss sticks decorated with elaborate, golden dragons have been placed, along with more incense sticks. The woman brings over another handful of lit incense sticks and begins to add them to the others in the red container. She then places incense around the table of offerings, moving her hands in a circular motion through the smoke in what seems to be an act of prayer.

A man who looks to be somewhere in his early sixties with black hair and deep, olive skin has been watching me from the shade of the club's porch. He walks over and stands beside me as I photograph the event and we begin to chat. I introduce myself and he tells me he is the president of the Poon Saan Club. The man gestures toward the tables of food and offerings, says everything I can see is for the people who were buried but do not have a grave. He tells me the shoes have been

left out so the dead can be happy on the island, but that sometimes it is difficult because you do not know what the dead want.

'Unless they come to you in a dream, maybe then you can know what they want. This time now is the only time we can talk,' the man continues. 'The only other time you know the dead are there is when you see shadows. When you see a shadow on the side of the road you slow down. It is the spirit letting you know you might have an accident; you see the shadow and you know to slow down.'

I am fascinated and incredibly pleased that my return to Christmas Island has coincided with such an intriguing festival. The Festival of the Hungry Ghost (also known as Zhongyuan, Yu Lan and Pudu) draws its origins from Taoist and Buddhist traditions. It is believed that during the seventh moon (around August/September), restless spirits are released from hell to roam the land. It is the most important festival in which offerings are made to the deceased in Chinese celebrations, and includes not only honouring one's own ancestors, but also those unnamed, transitory ghosts that have made their way from purgatory to the earthly realms. The two-sided attitude many Chinese people hold toward spirits is expressed in this ritual commemoration: both an attitude of awe and respect, as well as a fear of getting the other-world offside. The offerings made to the wandering ghosts are both an expression of compassion towards those spirits that may be experiencing ongoing suffering, but also a utilitarian act of self-preservation.

The Festival of the Hungry Ghost is a series of ritual acts in which bad luck can be averted and peace and prosperity ushered in for oneself, as well as for family, one's business and the larger community. It is an important time of bringing together diverse elements of a society in a united wish for peace and goodwill, as well as a rite of renewal. The communal element of the Festival of the Hungry Ghost is palpable for me as I look up and see a growing number of people from the island smiling and talking together in and outside of the hall. Just inside the door to the Poon Saan Club, I see a lean, older man talking together with a mother and her two young daughters. I can see the man has given the brown-haired pair of girls triangular paper flags decorated with red and yellow, snake-like dragons. The girls are intrigued and turn their gifts, taking in the colourful design. The pair look up and

the group laugh together warmly, their bodies lean in toward each other, the scene framed perfectly by an open, sliding door.

Three years after my return to the mainland, I was fascinated to hear about the film *Island of the Hungry Ghosts*, directed by another former island resident, Gabrielle Brady, who worked with asylum seekers in detention as a torture and trauma councillor. I found Brady's film excruciatingly painful to watch, her journey very much paralleling my own. Brady, presumably playing 'herself', documents the film's main character becoming deeply affected by the stories asylum seekers shared with her, compounded by the trauma of witnessing the needless suffering of detainees as a result of Australia's border policies. For Brady, like me, this combination of events results in her difficult decision to leave, despite the sense of abandoning the people caught up within this inhumane system. What is also fascinating, however, is that one of Brady's structural elements in the film is the way she weaves the influence of Chinese culture on Christmas Island through ritual scenes, interspersed throughout the larger narrative about Brady's experiences of detention. As the title *Island of the Hungry Ghosts* indicates, several of these scenes are about the Festival of the Hungry Ghost.

As I watched the film I was amazed to realise that Brady and I were at the Poon Saan Club on the same day in 2016, the same people appearing in our different mediums for recording what we saw during the ceremonies (my photographs show the same people in the same attire performing identical ceremonies to those documented in Brady's film footage). As this awareness dawned on me, I realised I could actually recall seeing Brady setting up her camera, getting ready to film, though at the time I had no idea who she was or why she was there.

In her documentary, Brady clearly indicates that she believes the rituals performed as part of the Festival of the Hungry Ghost were not only setting free relatives of the people gathered there, but also freeing the souls of those asylum seekers who had died on Christmas Island.[14] At the same time the film also portrays

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[14] The deaths of asylum seekers, both through drowning and in detention, are recorded at https://www.monash.edu/arts/border-crossing-observatory/research-agenda/australian-border-deaths-database. The most recent death is that of Fazal Chegani, an Iranian Kurd in his early 30s, who died in suspicious circumstances on Christmas Island on the eighth of November 2015.

the way Chinese Christmas Islanders work to facilitate the safe passage to the other side for the spirits of Chinese indentured labourers who died on Christmas Island, far from their home country, buried in anonymity in unmarked graves. As scenes of the island and its rituals flash before our eyes, we hear the distinctive voiceover of a Chinese Christmas Islander. He states '…the first people who arrived on Christmas Island one hundred years ago were not given a real burial, so we need to pray for them. For a month they are in the world of humans. They are Hungry Ghosts.'

I am only half aware of Brady who is now filming the young girls turning their flags, framed by the sliding door. Soon I notice that there are people beginning to form a line. I wander over and join the queue of people inside the hall. One by one we are given a large incense stick to light. When my turn comes, I place my stick in the sand where the islanders' collective will for peace visibly grows, becomes expressed as a complex scent filling the hall of diverse, animated faces, smoke weaving out of the door, reaching with tenuous tendrils into the humidity, gesturing toward the shimmering horizon of sea.

As I leave this lively scene, the crowd continues to grow and laughter begins to fill the air. I am reluctant to leave, intrigued, wishing to see what happens next, but I have been invited by the island's deputy school principal, Tina, for lunch. As my previous sense of isolation from the community on the island (largely due to my work with asylum seekers) has started to melt away, I have begun to feel an unexpected and exhilarating lightness about being back in a place I loved so much. I start to see Christmas Island with a fresh lens, notice there is a general sense of peace, an absence of latent tension and anger in the local community, so different from the time I was here six years ago. I have started initiating contact with more people, no longer fearing rejection, coming toward an acceptance of the importance of my small role in the island's history. Tina was my deputy on the Cocos Islands, but won a position on Christmas Island when her contract on Cocos ran out. It is strange to see Tina and her husband, Bob, on this island. Though only nine hundred kilometres apart, Christmas Island and the Cocos (Keeling) Islands felt worlds apart both in their topography and culture, but it is a relief to be meeting someone I spent most days with over the year our paths crossed, after being consistently out of my comfort zone since my return to Christmas Island.

I drive away from Poon Saan, moving slowly down the hill along Pai Chin Lu, my former street in Silver City. The dated, aluminium building in which my family lived (the silver cyclone-proof structures the source of the suburb's name) still sits on the corner with its magnificent views of Flying Fish Cove, though I can see someone has levelled the garden I had tended to with so much care, and I worry about the red crabs that had made their burrows amongst the fernery. A man and a child come out the back door, so I don't stop, instead turn left onto Seaview Drive where in the distance the phosphate chute comes into view, its industrial angles disjunct against a steep hillside graced with tropical greenery and back dropped by ocean.

I park, pull the handbrake hard on the incredibly steep road and make my way up the stairs to Bob and Tina's new home. This house used to be the school psychologist's residence during the time I lived here, a pole home nestled into lush foliage, but uphill the block has been ruthlessly cleared, rendering the house almost unrecognisable. As I reach the top step I am greeted warmly by a long table of familiar and unfamiliar smiling faces: the home economics teacher, the lady from the tourism centre, the director of the Indian Ocean Territories administration and his wife, and several faces I can't quite place. Someone immediately hands me a glass of white wine filled with ice and we all sit along a table covered with bright plates of food, sweating into the humidity, looking out at the stunning vista on this perfect, tropical day.

After lunch, Bob takes me out the back of the house and shows me his veggie patch. Bob is one of those straight-up, good-hearted people that are so easy to be around, the generosity of his personality accentuated by the warm, red tones of his beard that frames his pale, lightly freckled face.

'Reneé, I think you will be impressed by my runner beans,' Bob says, the traces of his American accent still evident in his broad vowels. We walk over toward make-shift trellis made from bamboo at the base of which small, soft shoots glow a vivid green.

Due to my love of gardening, my family and I had been chosen to look after the deputy principal's house on Cocos, a place with large, rambling grounds extending all the way to the sea. Ash and I maintained the home for six months until

Tina had been appointed to the position and moved in. After Tina's appointment, Bob had taken over the seaside garden on West Island, caring for the cuttings I had planted and building on the work we had done. Here Bob has also already made his mark on the newly cleared block, using the abundance of sun to grow not only beans, but cucumbers, cherry tomatoes and pumpkins, lemongrass, chillies and Thai basil. I crush the pungent leaves of herbs between my fingers as we talk about the challenges of nematodes and crabs, centipedes and feral chickens. Feeling the warmth of this old acquaintance, I start to wonder if I could live here again, if it would be a different experience the second time around.

Soon the sun gets too hot and we wander lazily back through the house to the deck where a boy of about twelve speaks excitedly to the group from the verandah's front steps, while his parents wait in the car still towing their boat at the bottom of the steep driveway. The boy's family have been fishing and caught two enormous wahoo, and they have divvied up the spoils to share with us all. The boy is handsome, with deeply tanned skin and a tangle of wavy bleached-blonde hair that spills around his face. Stripped to the waist he is lean and toned. He looks so alive, so engaged, he makes me think of Mowgli, here in his own jungle story being allowed an extended childhood away from the realities of the city.

Washed in sun and a golden, chardonnay hue, I feel almost euphoric standing on the deck looking down on the lush canopy, crowned with frangipani flowers in the neighbour's yard below, foliage framing a glistening slice of ever-shifting sea. The young stranger hands me a piece of bright fish sealed in a plastic bag and, in that moment, I wonder if I have judged this island too harshly, if I am wrong about its pervasive, dark heart. I consider whether my own lens has been skewed by my particular view through a veil of human suffering. With the closure of the Phosphate Hill detention centre and the scaled-down operations at North West Point, perhaps this place has reclaimed a measure of what now seems like a former innocence, a side of this island I was previously simply unable to see.

15

Blue

Blue, blue, blue! To be immersed once more, steeped deep with colour! In front of me the terrain of coral reaches as far as my eyes can see, saturated with a brilliant, sapphire hue. Blue like thick glass; blue, a diffuse net trapping liquid light. Jo swims in front of me, her long flippers sending up bright, white bubbles, two small, ascending waterfalls of luminescence.

After my trip to Phosphate Hill detention centre, I called Jo to catch up once again, and over dinner at The Golden Bosun, we decided to go for a snorkel from the jetty on what will be my second last day on Christmas Island. I want to spend as much time with Jo as I can before our paths part again, and I am also very keen to get in the water now my biopsy dressing has been removed. The threat of cancer has made each new day seem like something too precious to squander. I'm becoming fearless, highly present and suddenly expansive.

Setting off from the jetty, the cloud has dispersed, lighting up splayed swathes of colour, textured fingers and stilled frills, coral everywhere growing its small moons and wide planes. Then it stops. With a shocking suddenness, all abundance ceases and what opens out to me is a watery desert, a terrain of lifelessness and desolation, the skeletons of staghorn corals lying bleached and at strange angles like a field of bones. The part of the reef that once looked like a forest viewed from the air now appears more like a war zone in miniature.

I swim to the surface and Jo swims up to meet me. I pull the snorkel from my mouth, breathless.

'Jo, Yvonne said there had been some bleaching but I didn't know it had been this bad. This is devastating!'

'Actually, it's not as bad as it was,' Jo says, 'you should have seen it in April. After the bleaching the cove turned white, a winter wonderland. It was terribly beautiful, a bleached moonscape—all that life just suddenly wiped. The coral is

starting to come back, now, it's actually much better than it was. The thing is we don't know yet exactly what we have lost.'

As Jo speaks, I think of the islanders that cranked up their air-cons at night so they could sleep under heavy doonas, those who left their air-conditioners on while they set off for a six-week holiday so they didn't have to remove the mould on their walls on their return. Though the reasons for coral bleaching are multiple and complex, I still can't help but despair at many of our choices as humans, the lack of urgency expressed in what we do, especially when on the island what was at stake was right in front of us. I wonder what it takes for us as people to change our ways.

'Do you think the reef will recover, Jo?' I ask

'Well, it's amazing how resilient it has been, actually, so maybe. Whether the soft corals and things like that will return, I don't know. The problem is if we get another heat wave and it happens again…' Jo trails off and I get the feeling neither of us want to go down that path. We bite on our snorkels and duck back into the warmth of the water, past the graveyard of staghorn coral to where life once again pushes up lush and insistent.

Soon the sea floor drops away into a deep, azure darkness and I hover over the sea cliff, floating in a dream-scape, gazing down into a depth I cannot understand. To my surprise, once again a white-tipped reef shark, all sinew and s-bends, stream-lined and curving sensuousness, cruises past. I feel its one eye on me, scanning, watching. Once it has passed, I push down into a cloud of life, a school of blue and yellow angelfish rendered cinematic in watery light. The silence. Down here I feel like I am breathing, as if in all this stillness, all this abundance, is a place where I could make a home, where I could stay.

After our swim, Jo drops me back at my cottage and drives up the slope to her place in Silver City to have a shower and get changed. Just as the sun begins to glow golden, lowering itself into thin cloud shapes just above the horizon, she returns. I open a bottle of red wine I have kept in the fridge, pour myself a glass but Jo declines as she has to teach the next day. Instead I make her herbal tea and we talk looking out at the frangipani trees, their fat leaves silhouetted against the deepening sky, the silver bosuns still Ferris-wheeling raucously between the palm

trees. Jo is perhaps five years older than me, a quiet and capable woman, humble by nature, yet I feel I have much to learn from her unfailing attentiveness to the world around her. I am grateful for Jo's friendship, which has grown since I left Christmas Island, the two of us meeting for coffee when she has been back in Perth or messaging each other from time to time over the sea. Our common bond is forged by an interest in each other's work as artists, and the often-unspoken connection we have through our experiences of teaching asylum seekers, though at different times in the Phosphate Hill detention centre's history.

I tell Jo a publisher is interested in the poetry manuscript I wrote while living on the Cocos Islands, and that I am waiting to hear back after our meeting and my second edit, though I hasten to add it is early days. We toast our glasses chatting excitedly about the collection and the possibilities that might lay ahead. I ask Jo what is happening with her own work. Jo is a visual artist and her distinctive linocuts adorn the walls of the cottage where I am staying, textured works of pattern, movement and colour conjuring rock pools and beaches, temples and people. In the kitchen, the owners have hung one of Jo's prints depicting a temple scene, which I have found myself poring over, holding my morning coffee. The work's play of dark and light depicts a woman placing sticks of incense in a large urn. Behind her a banner decorated with images of dragons adorns the wall and a large, red flag curls in on itself.

'I get very inspired by the natural environment and people,' Jo says when I ask her about the print. 'The cultural side of things really stimulates me, I am fascinated by places like Ma Chor Nui Nui, the temple that is out by the resort. It is a cultural and religious site, yet when you go there you are actually surrounded by this wild seascape. There is something quite powerful about the ocean there, something difficult to explain, but when I am there I know why it is that islanders built a temple on that site to honour the Goddess of the Sea.'

As we sit looking over the water, we talk about the ruggedness of Christmas Island, its awe-inspiring energy, both brutal and exhilarating. Jo tells me that she experiences the island as something raw and elemental, as if the middle ground has been removed.

‘There is not a buffer here,’ Jo tells me. ’You come up against things, the boat accident, everything. You know, it is not very often that you are really up against things in such an immediate way—a way that affects you directly—on the mainland. I think you can be very removed in a suburb of the city.’

Jo tells me that years ago, before she had children and long before the place became known as the notorious detention centre site, Jo and her former partner used to spend time walking around North West Point. Following fisherman’s tracks and slashing through jungle, they would spend hours finding their way along the cliff’s lower terrace. Jo tells me that an image stays in her mind, lit and vivid, of stepping out from the jungle into a clearing at the top of a cliff where a stunning vista of water opened before her.

‘It was one of those days when the ocean was absolutely crystal clear, completely glass-like,’ Jo says. ‘We stood on the top of the cliff with the jungle all around us and suddenly a huge pod of spinner dolphins swam by, leaping out of the water, turning in the air. There was not a single ripple other than where the dolphins leapt from the water. It was almost like they were they were leaping out of the water because they knew we had come out there just at that instant. It was a really magical moment.’

We begin to speak about the detention centre, and I ask Jo if she too feels like there has been a shift in the culture of the island since North West Point detention centre had been scaled down and the family detention facility at Phosphate Hill closed. She tells me it is as though there has been a collective sigh of relief across the community—like a simplicity, a lightness has returned to Christmas Island, a shift back to the place she used to know twenty-one years ago. Twenty-one years ago. I hold the figure in my mind, taken aback, I had no idea Jo had been here so long. 1995, the year Jo arrived, before Tampa, before Children Overboard. Before. It now seems almost impossible to imagine.

Jo tells me about her experiences of teaching in the early days of mandatory detention. Jo started working in 2003, two years after the Tampa incident.[15] Her

[15] For a detailed analysis on Tampa and its implications for asylum seeker policy, see: https://theconversation.com/australian-politics-explainer-the-mv-tampa-and-the-transformation-of-asylum-seeker-policy-74078

work began at the family detention centre at Phosphate Hill, teaching English to Vietnamese asylum seekers before the North West Point detention centre was built. At this time, the detainees were essentially two groups of extended families. Many members of the family had been businessmen and women and professional people who were frustrated at their lack of entrepreneurial freedom. They had started distributing anti-communist leaflets in Vietnam, and it was this action that threatened the government and ultimately forced them to flee. Jo tells me about the incredible vegetable garden made by the asylum seekers, brimming with flowers and produce. A little baby was also born in the camp, and Jo was able to bring her own baby daughter to meet the young family so their children could play.

'I stopped working when Ruby was born but used to take her up there to visit the Vietnamese people in the detention centre and they loved it. They loved it because it was a little baby being brought in and they spoiled her rotten and sewed little clothes for her. I have still got the little white cotton Vietnamese outfits they made for her. It was a really special relationship.'

Jo tells me a young couple even got married in detention and she was able to lend the bride her wedding dress for the ceremony. The couple's wedding photos were taken with a disposable camera. Yet in all this life-fulness, Jo tells me she also struggled with witnessing the effects of long-term detention on the detainees.

'The families were in detention for two years up at Phosphate Hill and the children were in detention as well—they were released to go to school but locked up again every night. It is an unnatural living environment and the conditions just bred problems. I worked with the Vietnamese asylum seekers for a year, or two years maybe, and I saw people go mad. I think detention has caused so much damage to so many people. If you have to do it for a short period of time just to process people during the initial stages, I can accept that, just for a couple of weeks at the most, but I have seen the damage it has done, it is a terrible thing to do to people. It makes people go crazy; it makes them give up hope.'

The sun has sunk below the horizon now, and Jo and I sit in silence for a while, warm breeze on our skin. At the end of the low headland, frigatebirds angle between the palm trees, haunting the air, speeding past in groups of twenty or thirty birds, silent and unafraid.

‘You asked me last night about the ocean,’ Jo says, turning to me. ‘About whether it affects the way I experience this place. I have been thinking quite a lot about your question. It made me realise that the ocean here links me to other places. Especially with the asylum seekers that come, but also through all the objects that wash up. On Greta beach, though all the rubbish brought by the tide is bad for the ocean, if I can take the environmental factor out I find it amazing that all these objects have been used by people. To me it can almost bring you closer to other people—we are actually not that far removed. I think in Australia there is such a sense of wanting to shut ourselves off from the rest of the world and protect our borders and all that, but on Greta Beach there are these little bottles that were used for shampoo or hand-cream, or toothbrushes. They are like small, washed-up stories.’

Jo goes on to tell me about one piece of flotsam that really spoke to her. It was an old toothbrush, something usually shunned not just as rubbish, but as dirty, unhygienic. Yet she was so struck by its human imprint that she ended up using it in her artwork.

‘It was like it had been used for so many years that the handle had bent right back and the bristles were worn down to almost nothing, they were splayed right out, and I don’t know why, but it just made me think of an old Indonesian man, you know, brushing his teeth and he had probably been using the same toothbrush for ten years or something; at least, that is what I imagined. I often turn over the kids’ toys washed up on the beach and think about who has played with them, and then something like a tiny shoe arrives, and it can’t help but make you think of all the people making that journey by sea.’

I get up and turn on the light so I can see Jo’s face better as the last light disappears from the horizon.

‘Oh, it is getting late,’ Jo says. ‘I’d better get back otherwise my kids will think I have abandoned them! But before I go, let me tell you one more story I think you would really appreciate...’

I drain the last sip of wine from my glass and pull my chair toward Jo, willing her on. Jo tells me the moment had taken place earlier in her time on the island, before the asylum seeker issue became significant for the community, before there

was even a general consciousness of refugee people and their families drowning at sea. Jo had walked along the coral pebbles at West White Beach, turning over shells, looking at flotsam, when a stark rectangle had caught her eye. Jo walked toward the strange object and, once closer, realised she had found a rickety old suitcase lying washed up on the shore. It had felt surreal, to see it lying there in the sun, its small form dark against the white, bleached coral. Jo bent down and pulled on the case's salt-encrusted clasps and, though they were rusty, she found she could open them. Intrigued, she lifted the lid of the old case and peered inside. There, framed by the case's battered edges, were two items only—a folded black suit and a polished pair of men's shoes.

16
Turning Back

In the cove on this, my last morning on Christmas Island, boats sit bright as a pin. The vessels are all primary colour and child's toys' hues: reds, whites, blues, clean lines, by the dusty phosphate tower beneath a single palm tree on the island's headland. Before my drive down to Flying Fish Cove for this, the final time, I had driven up to Taj Jin House and placed the coral pebbles I had inscribed around the plaque commemorating the three hundred and fifty-three people who had died aboard the SIEV X. The flowers I had placed earlier beneath the rocks had gone, but I reassured myself if was just the wind and walked up toward the house's gardens, which tumble in a shout of colour from the sheer, limestone cliffs. I felt still, quiet, as I picked bright sprigs of bougainvillea. Placing the purple foliage amongst grey pebbles, I felt a sense of grounding and release, as though in this act of honouring, something in me was being restored.

Now, sitting by the water, taking in my last moments at the cove, I feel relieved and surprised that my return to Christmas Island has been so peaceful, so pleasurable. I had anticipated this half of the trip as something of a necessary ordeal, yet I have felt there has been a place for me on this island this time around, a place not just held by the island itself, but by the people who crossed my path.

Washed in a deep sense of happiness and wellbeing, I walk along the pebbled beach to the jetty. I can see a Zodiac speeding in from the large, blue ship, the Ocean Shield. I realise now that his is a Border Force ship and that the officers must be coming ashore. When I reach the end of the jetty, I take a closer look at the boat and suddenly the penny drops. The great, white arm on the back of the ship is lowering a beautifully crafted red and white Indonesian-style fishing boat. At the edge of the port's cliff face I can see two more fishing vessels have been placed

ready to move. These are turn back boats.[16] These are not old boats left at the port after asylum seekers had arrived; these are new vessels designed to push people fleeing persecution back to their perpetrators. I start to shake, my body racked with fury. I take the camera slung over my shoulder and start to photograph the boats. It is then that I suddenly understand that the orange vessels stacked in the prow and placed in platforms built into the side of the hull are not only life rafts as I had presumed, but also turn back boats, cruel vessels that make asylum seekers incredibly sick as they offer no windows and little to no ventilation.

I notice a woman waiting in a bus on the jetty is watching me as I photograph the boats. I realise she is probably there to transport the Border Force officers to accommodation in Settlement. I can see a port worker in high-vis work wear waiting for something by the rail, so I approach him, pushing down my anger, and say hello. We chat and I ask him if he knows about the boats, and the young, Malay man confirms the bright vessels are used to turn back asylum seekers at sea.

'The Indonesian Government was getting angry,' he says, because they knew the orange boats were from Australia, so the Australian government made some boats to look like Indonesian fishing vessels. We have some Vietnamese workers at the port and they say they are good boats, top boats, top of the range for fishing.'

I thank the young man and walk back along the jetty, enraged, feeling utterly betrayed. Things have not changed out here in the middle of the Indian Ocean. The suffering of asylum seekers continues, it has just become even more silenced, the lives of these already marginalised people now completely hidden from view. This is why I could never stay. I suddenly feel suffocated by the palimpsest of dark acts that have occurred here over generations, made possible by the remoteness of this landmass surrounded by wild sea. I walk briskly back to the car and find my phone and, despite my latent anxiety about the threat of the *Border Force Act*, begin posting pictures of what I have seen, determined to make what the Australian government does to vulnerable people visible by any means available to me. It is then I remember glimpsing orange vessels similar to those on the Ocean Shield up

[16] For more information on the secretive nature of boat turn backs in Australia, see: https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2016/nov/28/existence-of-pivotal-letter-from-scott-morrison-on-boat-turnbacks-revealed

at Phosphate Hill, but at that time I had assumed they were also life rafts. I start the car and drive up the hill through Poon Saan to the top of the island, turn off at the road to Phosphate Hill detention centre. And there they are, fenced off with familiar Government warnings about trespass: three more orange turn back vessels, a tractor and a crane. I sit in the car at the side of the road, trying to calm down. *Get me out of here,* I think, *Get me out of this place!* My plane can't come soon enough.

17

My Island Home

What is it about Christmas Island that keeps drawing me back? Even now as I am sitting here in the Great Southern in Western Australia, almost exactly two years after my brief return to the Indian Ocean Territories, more than three thousand kilometres away, the trace of that place sits like a presence or a shadow, like something whispered but not quite heard. Christmas Island is unsettled and unsettling, haunting and haunted, its ghosts linger, troubling thought and memory, flickering at the edges of my vision.

From my desk, my mind speeds back across the Indian Ocean to circle this semi-submarine mountain, looking for a foothold, a way up and in, needing to form a narrative, a story to help me understand. It is not just the trauma of the people I witnessed on the island that I cannot shake, but how these experiences formed fissures into a bedrock of belief in the country that I loved. That I loved…do I still love the country that I once believed deeply defined me?

I feel a compelling need to make sense of what I saw at our country's watery borders, to know what this witnessing tells me about our Island Nation. Perhaps it is the very way white Australians imagine our nation[17] that can give me the best point of entry into the complex heart of our country.

In his recent memoir, 'Island Home', iconic Australian author Tim Winton tells us that his experience of Australia as a singular island is something 'seen and felt'[18]:

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[17] Indigenous Australians did not perceive of Australia as an 'Island Nation', but instead as a series of overlapping tribal or nation groups informed by 'intimate cultural relationships with the land and the sea'. See the AIATSIS map of Indigenous Australia at https://aiatsis.gov.au/explore/articles/aiatsis-map-indigenous-australia.

[18] 'The Island Seen and Felt' is the title of Winton's second chapter in the text, from which the subsequent quote is taken.

> I grew up on the world's largest island…The island continent has not been mere background. Landscape has exerted a kind of force upon me that is every bit geographical as family. Like many Australians, I feel this tectonic grind—call it a familial ache—felt most keenly when I am abroad.

Winton's references to his country of birth throughout the book are unselfconsciously insular, Winton clearly strongly identifies with the bounded grammar of Australia as a single island. The metaphor holds him, orientates him as he defines his place within a larger world. Winton is not alone in his reference to Australia as an Island Nation. The image is a compelling one and, up until my time in the Indian Ocean Territories, one with which I unconsciously concurred. The seemingly self-evident image of Australia as a unified, single entity is powerful and seductive, a 'master metaphor' in which the diverse members of disparate communities are held together by an idealised image of our landmass.

Yet this iconic image of Australia is not as innocent as we would like to believe. While bringing together many under its flag, Island Australia has also shown its capacity to breed a culture of exclusivity and hostility, as this ideal of nationhood strives to maintain its fiction. In the words of Jacqueline Rose, insularity equally surfaces as 'fierce blockading protectiveness, walls up all around our inner and outer, our psychic and historical selves'. Tidalectic writer and author *of Reading the Planetary Archipelago of the Torres Strait,* Elizabeth McMahon, describes the hostility toward the 'other' that lies behind this will to belong as a 'disavowal of difference'. This simplistic view of Australia can encourage and reinforce an erasure of knowing, of seeing, a blindness toward those who do not fall within our definition of a national 'Us'. 'We are one, but we are many', we sing in what has become Australia's unofficial anthem, yet when we raise our voices in seeming unison, we are not only celebrating our seemingly contained nation, we are drawing borders around bodies, around a space that creates the 'in' of the 'Australian' and the 'out' of the 'un-Australian'.

Not long after my return to mainland Australia after living in the Indian Ocean Territories, I was walking down my suburban street near Fremantle, when I noticed a car parked at the side of the road displaying a 'FUCK OFF, WE'RE FULL!'

sticker prominently on the back window, the words framed with the iconic image of Island Australia. Much to my surprise, before I registered what I was doing, I had ripped the sticker from the back of the car and taken off down the street. Heart beating hard in my chest, I crumpled the thin, plastic strip into an unrecognisable ball before throwing it in a park bin. I had seen for myself the dire consequences for those who do not fall within the embrace of our definition of 'Australian', in the geographical violence played out in the name of border protection. I could not let the inherently hateful slur go.

The geographical violence I witnessed in Australia's most remote territory is exposed in Suvendrini Perera's scathing analysis of Australia's border policies in *Australia and the Insular Imagination*. Though written in 2009, Perera's work remains one of the pithiest analyses of the relationship between Australia's insular outlook and the lethal nature of our nation's detention policies. More recently, Austin and Fozdar explore the use of national identity (including a 'Fair Go') for both inclusive and exclusive border narratives. Austin and Fozdar also make interesting links with Ghassan Hage in their discussion of the role of globalisation in inflaming insecurities of Australian citizens through the perceived deterioration of the power and self-determination of the nation-state.[19] However, it is the work of writer, advocate and asylum seeker Behrouz Boochani that gives us the lens to see the consequences of Australia's brutal border policies from the point of view of those most affected; that is, asylum seekers themselves. Boochani's award-winning book *No Friend but the Mountains* is a unique literary expression of a regime of suffering inside Australia's detention system on Manus Island.

The troubled heart of our country and its complex relationship with border zones like Christmas Island first became apparent to me in the Indian Ocean Territories at the memorial service for the Christmas Island boat tragedy (the same one where I had first heard Zainal speak).[20] My family and I arrived on Christmas

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[19] Hage's analysis of the circulation of hope in nation states is a focus of the final chapter of this thesis. In a chapter entitled *Transcendental capitalism and the shrinking configuration of hope,* Hage argues that interests of multinational firms often eclipse the interests of the state, contributing to a sense of 'hope scarcity' amongst its citizens.

[20] For examples of further analyses of the Christmas Island Boat tragedy, see Richard Flanagan's reflections in The Guardian: https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2010/dec/16/christmas-island-tragedy-australian-humanity

Island three weeks after the tragedy, and the silence on the island about what had happened on December fifteen, 2010, was unsettling. Despite the deeply distressing circumstances in which fifty asylum seekers drowned, I was grateful for the knowledge that the ceremony would take place. I saw the memorial service as a moment that would help the island heal by allowing a space for the islanders' and the asylum seekers' shared grief, bringing people together as they experienced their shared humanity in the face of adversity, brought together in the honouring of each precious life.

The memorial service took place on the fifth of March 2011, at the island's recreation centre at the top of Phosphate Hill. The large hall was filled with flowers (no easy feat three thousand kilometres from a nursery!). Thick sunlight sat between the leaves in open door of the podium, behind which, only metres away, you could see the pool fencing that marked the border of the Phosphate Hill detention centre. Islanders gathered in the large building, women embracing and chatting in low tones, men sitting silently and stiffly in white, plastic chairs. I glanced around restlessly, wondering when the asylum seekers would arrive, wondering how the survivors must be feeling on this difficult day. As the hall rapidly filled up, I glanced at my watch—9:45, the ceremony was about to begin. I was worried, anxious, I could see there were not enough chairs now for when the refugee people arrived, wondered why the bus was running late for such an important occasion.

Chris Su, a local member of the Chinese community, stepped up to the microphone and formally opened the proceedings. I began to feel sick, where were the asylum seekers? I turned around craning my neck, to see if anyone was going to ask the MC to wait, hoping those from the *Janga* were perhaps just outside in the door and I had not seen them. But the faces behind me looked sad but calm, no-one looked overly troubled by the start of the ceremony. I glanced again at the door, but there were no asylum seekers waiting politely in the building's foyer.

The Minister for Veteran's Affairs and Defence Science and Personnel, Warren Snowdon, was introduced. He laid his Akubra aside, stepped up to the microphone and announced from behind his moustache:

> We are honoured to be present today on behalf of the Australian government to acknowledge and thank the Christmas Island community for your efforts in the aftermath of the crash of SIEV 221. I can only imagine the sense of helplessness you must have experienced wanting to save these people, but [instead were] powerless to support the emergency effort except through land-based support. The rocky landscape where this occurred is also notoriously razor sharp—meaning even land-based support was fraught. I want to commend the skills and bravery of Border Protection command personnel involved in the rescue effort.

The Nation's 'Border protection command', why didn't the Minister just say 'Navy''?[21] *Why was he being insensitive to this tragic context by using polarising titles, and by 'these people', does he mean asylum seekers?* While these questions raced through my mind as Snowdon continued to speak, it began to dawn on me that the seeming insensitivities in the Minister's response to the tragedy were no accident—they had been strategically thought through. With a growing sense of shock and disbelief, I realised that asylum seekers were not going to be directly referred to, they were being erased from the narrative of grief before my eyes. Suddenly I understood with a terrible clarity what was unfolding. The asylum seekers were not coming, they had not been invited to a memorial service about their own loved ones, and they were being carefully edited out of official versions of their own story. Sitting in that flower-filled space, I was washed with shame and rage, consumed by my own powerlessness to stop what was happening. I wanted to leap to my feet and shout at the room full of officials, the crowd of islanders, *Why on earth do you think we are we all here?* But instead I sat simmering mutely in my hard, plastic chair. I was new in town, I was not even there on the day the tragedy occurred. I had repeatedly learnt in my few weeks on this isolated island I had no right to ask difficult questions. The minister asked for a minute's silence.

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[21] The term 'Border Force' was not introduced until announced by the then Immigration and Border Protection Minister, Scott Morrison, in 2014 (see https://www.lowyinstitute.org/news-and-media/multimedia/audio/podcast-future-border-protection-scott-morrison-mp). Until then, border patrolling was largely referred to as the work of Customs or the Navy.

As the service continued, some of the subsequent speakers did seek to acknowledge the death and suffering of asylum seekers, and several islanders explicitly sought to humanise the people on board the SIEV 221. This included Zainal's deeply moving speech in which he recounts the heartbreak of what he witnessed:

> I cannot stop seeing the eyes, the faces, of the people on the boat as it was dashed against the rocks, the father desperately clinging to the boat with one hand and with the other clutching his child to his side. Then a child swept from the arms of the mother. It was horrible.

Zainal went on to recount how he made eye contact with one little girl holding onto a piece of wood amongst the debris of the broken boat. Though they were only metres from each other, the dangerous swell meant Zainal could not reach the child in order to save her from drowning. With a choked voice and tears falling in a steady stream down his face and onto the podium over which his body curled, Zainal shared that, later that same day, he discovered the little girl's body washed up on the shore of Ethel Beach.

Letters of thanks written by asylum seekers to islanders, medical staff, Immigration and Serco were also read out. We signed books, left flowers, wrote messages of heartfelt sadness, coming together in our sorrow and grief as an island community. Yet these gestures were completely overshadowed by the absence of the very people who had lost family and friends. In a Joint Select Committee Hearing on the Christmas Island Boat tragedy, The Department of Immigration and Citizenship records report:

> Discussions between the Shire and DIAC leading up to the memorial on 5 March covered the issue of attendance of the survivors…Over several days DIAC's advice changed from the survivors [sic] would be transferred off the island before the event, then they would be here and DIAC would facilitate the attendance. Finally in a couple of days before the memorial Fiona Andrew [Assistant Secretary to the Department of Immigration and Citizenship]

advised that she was advised the best interests of the survivors would not be served by their attendance.

When a group of mourners are denied their rights to their grieving process, their ability to come to terms with their grief is significantly impaired. Kenneth Doka first coined the term 'disenfranchised grief' when researching the grieving patterns of ex-spouses in 1980. Marina Larsson expands on Doka's work to describe disenfranchised grief as the process whereby a person experiences a loss, but that loss cannot be 'openly acknowledged, publicly mourned, or socially supported because society's "grieving rules" do not afford the person the recognised right, role or capacity to grieve'.

The memorial service on Christmas Island on the fifth of March 2011, clearly demonstrated that the Australian government had made the decision that what would be remembered about the boat tragedy would be the government's and Christmas Islander's version of events; that is, the witness of Australian citizens. These events would be relayed by selected government officials and islanders alone. These recollections and contributions would be communicated in a way that completely controlled input from non-citizens (asylum seekers) who were deemed unworthy of the right to attend a memorial even when that memorial was about their own loved ones. This act was made all the more insidious by the fact that those related to the deceased were literally a matter of metres away, imprisoned within the Phosphate Hill compound, within hearing distance of the service. The decision made to exclude survivors of the boat tragedy from the service portrays the acts of memorialisation as rituals to allow for the mourning process of islanders, while carefully minimising and stage-managing asylum seekers' grief.

Yet the lack of meaningful commemoration not only impacted on asylum seekers, it also deeply affected islanders who were involved in the rescue effort on that day. On my return to the islands, one islander, who wished to remain anonymous, shared her reflections with me, looking over the ocean near Rocky Point (the site of the tragedy) in the following way:

> It is hard. It is hard to see babies die, to see people die and not be able to do something. Most people's instinct is to rush in and do something and everyone's instinct there that day was to do that and they were completely unable to, we had no power to do anything but watch and I think that makes people feel powerless, but also question what it is all about. You question lots and lots of things after an event like that, you know—we are so protected in Australia, away from the universal tragedies that occur globally. It does affect you. You may not be able to fully understand in what way, but I think a lot of the community, a lot of people have had to just—the first few weeks were quite traumatic, people were getting counselling, or not, or just chatting about it between themselves trying to process as best they could, and then you have to get past it, you have to keep moving, but then what do you do with it when you are at that point, what do you do with that information and that sort of scenario? What do you do with all that grief? I guess you have to put it somewhere and deal with it whenever you do, like any tragedy in anybody's life, I guess. I don't know…I think the worst thing about it was there was this whole—it became politicised and they [the asylum seekers] were whisked away, never to be seen again and normally there would be a bit if a debrief after that might go on for a while where survivors and rescuers and people gathered together and talked, but it was just wiped, this one.

But even in the most brutal acts of silencing and marginalisation, if we look closely, we can often find traces of resistance and presence, even in the silence itself. Of the five letters of thanks read on the day of the memorial service and printed in the local newsletter, *The Islander*, only one letter thanks the Navy and police, a brief sentence of seven words added almost like an afterthought, 'Residents on the island who witnessed the incident tried to save us throwing life jackets and ropes. And so did the Navy and police.' Every heartfelt expression of thanks is directed toward those who lived and worked on Christmas Island, while a striking silence remains toward those whose role was to help avert disasters in Australian waters. I look at these letters and go back and read my record of Tom's recount of what took place on December fifteen, 2010. I dwell on the words, 'We

knew the Navy was just around the corner at Ethel Beach. We thought they must be coming at any moment. Another Navy vessel was further out to sea. No one came. Until the boat was in pieces and spread across the coast, nobody from the Navy arrived.'

After the Christmas Island boat tragedy, survivors of the mass drowning and families of those who died filed a class action against the Australian Government. This class action was lodged against the Federal Government for its failure to rescue asylum seekers in the hours between the time the *Janga* was first sighted off the coast of Christmas Island and when it was smashed against the rocks, as well as other seeming systemic failures that were believed to have contributed to the large numbers of those who drowned. This action ultimately ruled in favour of the Australian government, but has disturbing resonances with other incidences in which the Navy appears to have willingly failed to act in order to prevent asylum seekers from drowning, including witness statements from those aboard the SIEV X. It is also relevant to note that in the act of saving the lives of people aboard the sinking *Palapa* (which the Australian government subsequently refused to allow to enter Christmas Island), the crew of the Tampa unwittingly made political history. Given the significant questions that remain around the willingness of the Australian government, Navy and Border Force to save the lives of asylum seekers as sea, I would venture to suggest that the silence in the asylum seekers letters, the seeming omission in their statements of thanks, speaks volumes about what took place that day, nine years ago.

While letters from asylum seekers were included at the memorial service on the fifth of March, the letters provided by the Department of Immigration and Culture and Security Company, Serco, all were *exclusively* expressions of thanks to the islanders and the Department of Immigration and Serco themselves, rather than expressions of the inconceivable grief and trauma the survivors must have been experiencing. This makes it hard to believe there was not some 'stage managing' around what asylum seekers were invited to express. Fortunately, the island's Shire President, Gordon Thompson (an active advocate for asylum seekers on Christmas Island), was able to approach several asylum seekers directly about what they wished to say on the day of the service. Gordon was also able to share something of

the asylum seekers' specific experiences of loss so we got more idea of them as people, a small sense of their stories.

One of the letters that Gordon read out at the service was a letter from Ramin. Ramin lost his wife and son as well as his brother and brother's wife the day the *Janga* sank and was caring for his orphaned nephew. Ramin's letter is full of gratitude, yet through his words we can finally allow our hearts to break over what happened that day. Ramin's raw devastation and sheer humanity shine through each of his words. Though he could not tell his story in person at the March service, thanks to Gordon's efforts he could at least share his story on his own terms:

> I don't know how to bring forward my feelings and thoughts to you. It's amazing that people who live together here have such a big heart and that everyone tried their best to help other humans. This is not me just saying this to you. It's my family, my relatives over there in Iran and here in the camp. Here on Christmas Island we have met the kindest people on earth. From my heart I appreciate your help. I hope this never happens again. Some people, they like to hide the facts, the differences between people cause them to hide the facts. I wish I could talk in your language to Australia and Iran and all the countries how it is here, how kind you are. This is an island in the middle of the whole ocean and facilities might be limited, we appreciate the limited things here, we are grateful. I hope one day if we get the honour to be Australians, we'd like to meet people like you in our life. We lost wife, kids, a lot of people. That much effort for a sudden thing is a lot. We come from the worst place in the world, the worst human acts and we come to you, the most kind. I am so happy to have met people like you. Even if we don't end up staying in Australia, I appreciate meeting you.
>
> 'Anywhere we go the sky is blue, it's the people who make the place beautiful' (Iranian Proverb).

As I sit here typing Ramin's words from my copy of *The Islander*, I can't help but feel the awful tension between his outpouring of gratitude and the fact that he

was not permitted to attend the memorial for his wife and son, their lives unmentionable by our own Defence Minister. I also think of Tom's recount of what took place on the fateful day, and how he shared that some of the islanders threatened to throw rocks at the struggling boat. I think of my colleague who was there helping with the rescue on the day of the tragedy, months later wanting to call a work cocktail 'Refos on the Rocks', of the threats some islanders made to burn down the SIEV 221 memorial if it was placed at the site of the tragedy near the Golden Bosun pub at Rocky Bay. Ramin's words are humbling, the choices of my fellow islanders and my nation's government, deeply disturbing. Are the spite and hate that steep these acts, these expressions of inward-looking protectiveness, what it means to be truly 'Australian'?

The violence inherent in the myth of Island Australia has been powerfully expressed at other key turning points in Christmas Island's history. In August 2001, in the days directly following the Tampa crisis, the Howard government sought to excise Christmas Island and the Cocos (Keeling) Islands from the migration zone.[22] Critics of insularity, such as Suvendrini Perera, describe this excision as an urgent and deadly territorial enactment, a move designed to strip asylum seekers of their legal right to seek asylum in our country, a 'hostile act along racialised lines' as the Howard government actively strove to inflame a climate of fear.

In *Against a Paranoid Nationlism*, Ghassan Hage attempts to make sense of 'the Australian social and political reality (or lack of it) created by the rule of John Howard's Liberal National Party.' Hage describes the way in which the Howard government marked a resurgence in what he describes as 'white colonial paranoia', a fearful protectiveness that had been largely marginalised since the advent of World War Two. Hage argues that the shift toward Australia's self-concept as a 'multicultural' nation in the 1980s, as well as the Mabo ruling in 1992 acknowledging the lawful ownership of land by Indigenous Australians prior to colonisation, alienated many white Australians. Howard played on a nostalgia for a return to 'Australian' values, a fantasy of 'changing back' to an unquestionably Eurocentric Australian culture.

[22] For details on the excision legislation see https://www.legislation.gov.au/Details/C2004A00887.

I can't help but wonder, had events not been cast so darkly across the globe over the weeks to come, whether the Howard government would have been so extraordinarily successful in spinning his divisive narrative, a fearful story that has largely gripped the nation since. Yet within weeks of Tampa, the Twin Towers did fall, and on September 11, 2001, 2996 people died in the wake of the terrorist attack in New York City. John Howard was in Washington on the day of September 11. Up until that time he had been struggling in the polls and a Labour victory seemed likely. On that terrible and fateful day eighteen years ago, Howard must have realised September 11 was his moment. The enactment of the excision legislation, though hastily drafted in response to Tampa, and the legally dubious act of the military seizing the Norwegian freighter off Christmas Island, were now seemingly vindicated in the light of a perceived new threat—the Middle-Eastern 'terrorist'. Our struggling Prime Minister immediately gave the order for Australian troops to join America in the war in Iraq and Afghanistan, framing himself as the man in charge of rescuing the nation. On his return to Australia, Howard set a surer foot on our country's tarmac, armed with the politics of fear and the excision's enactment. The announcement of the opening of a detention centre on Christmas Island was made within weeks of the devastating events at the World Trade Centre. Soon after, Howard would famously announce his historic words, 'We will decide who comes into this country and the circumstances in which they come.' Our country's leaders' commitment to framing asylum seekers as potential terrorists began.

Such recent events played out on Christmas Island only add to its complex palimpsest of successive histories, from days of beriberi and indentured labour (under British rule), to a site of incarceration and punishment for the 'un-Australian'. Christmas Island is a dynamic place, layered and contradictory, a world of violence and palm-fringed serenity that balms and accosts you with its fierce beauty. Such duplicitous country births not so much stories, but legends and myths. It is a 'badland', in Ross Gibson's terms—country that ghosts the Australian psyche, more felt than seen. Gibson writes about the Central Queensland hinterland, yet there are things we can learn from his world of 'trouble and stark beauty' that can teach us about this mountain in the middle of the sea, lessons that involve a kind of

waiting, an openness to the place itself, to hear what, even from this distance, it might teach us.

The violence Gibson tells us that is bred in a badland is expressed through the wildness of the terrain, there is something unpredictable and untameable in these realms that is complicit in creating the overwhelming sense that one is inhabiting a world of extremes where everything is set to riot or convulse. However, it is when the layers of a violent and largely unacknowledged history combine with this inherently wild country, that spaces get excised from the collective consciousness and live as ghosts, banished but present, flaming our anxieties and fears.

Gibson defines a badland as a 'quarantine zone', a space

> [that] tends to guarantee that everywhere else outside the cordon can be defined (with reference to a no-go zone) as well-regulated, social and secure…in the same breath, while acknowledging that dysfunction is abroad, the narrator can also show that trouble can be assigned to a no-go area, to a place which is comprehensible as elsewhere-but-still-Australia.

Gibson's main point of entry for delving into the badland of Queensland's brigalow country is the year 1975, through the story of Noel and Sophie Weckett, visitors to the 'Horror Stretch', a tract of land mired with a murderous history. We follow the journey of these two travellers who pull over to sleep in their car at the side of the road, their lives coming to an abrupt end as a passing motorist pulls a shotgun out of his car. The double-murder soon hits the press, fuelling a latent anxiety in the imaginaries of Queenslanders, as well as the broader psyche of Australians, that this known 'no-go zone' was once again expressing its penchance for bloodshed, its unwillingness to be contained and controlled. Brigalow country was 'bad', the media asserted in its headlines, a hostile place that served as a menace to Australian's belief in a settled and stable nation, therefore immediately re-relegating it to 'other' in the hearts and minds of the populace.

By cordoning Queensland's tablelands off in narratives generated outside of the imaginatively excised zone, the rest of Australia could be reassured that their

lives were not implicated or threatened by the repeated violence played out in the region, so long as they stayed in the 'well-ordered' places in the rest of the country. But for Gibson, the murders were part of a pattern expressed in the history of the region, a series of 'expectation[s], action[s] and reaction[s]' that worked on the country through space and time, a larger story about who we are as a nation, and therefore a story that implicates us all.

Gibson tells us that 'History is stories making facts happen…It is not by its history that the mythology of a nation is determined but, conversely, its history is determined by its mythology.' White Australia's stories of Central Queensland began when the tablelands were settled by colonisers in the late 1800s through a series of genocidal acts carried out by what was (with an interesting resonance to contemporary titles) originally known as the 'Border Police'. Later renamed the 'Native Mounted Police Force', border policing traditionally involved a small number of Aboriginal men from distant tribes, given modern weaponry and overseen by two white officers, employed to 'disperse' the traditional Aboriginal people of the area, violent acts that allowed for the fragmentation, traumatisation and murder of the local indigenous populations by creating a morally ambiguous zone at the frontier.

Unacknowledged and ungrieved, cloaked in a world of euphemism and silence, the deaths that were tolerated—even if barely seen—as part of colonial expansion began to steep the landscape, sat as a sense of menace or malevolence embedded in the wildness of the terrain. It is not surprising, then, that when thirteen thousand Melanesian labourers, mainly from the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu, stepped onto brigalow country that same century, they unknowingly stepped into a widening fault line in the moral landscape of this fledgling colonial outpost, and a new layer of violence and its accomplice, silence, was added to the complex structure of this wild land.[23]

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[23] It is worth noting here that in July 2019, a long-running battle between the Queensland state government and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders was recently settled with a record $190 million dollar compensation fund for wages withheld from 1939 to 1972. This is the fifth-largest class action settlement in Australian history and the largest financial settlement outside a native title ruling, opening up the possibility for similar claims throughout Australia. https://www.abc.net.au/radio/programs/pm/qld-govt-settles-landmark-stolen-wages-class-action/11293230

I trace my personal journey back once again to Fitzroy Crossing, where my own belief in a 'Fair Go'[24] Australia was first deeply shaken, and I gained a sense of this wild country also being an excised space, cordoned off from the hearts and minds of most Australians. In 'Every Mother's Son is Guilty', author and historian Chris Owen tells us that—interestingly, like Christmas Island—the Kimberley was first colonised in the late 1870s for guano mining. At this time, the occupation of the Kimberley by white settlers was relatively peaceful, violence was 'the exception rather than the norm'. However, as cattle farmers from New South Wales and Queensland drove their stock overland to the red centre, they bought with them the 'violent logic of the border' Gibson writes about. Owen writes:

> These colonists came from colonies where pastoralists openly killed Aboriginal people on their 'runs'. The Queensland government used the notorious Native Police to quell Aboriginal resistance and this background profoundly influenced the attitude of colonialists to Kimberley Aboriginal groups.

This 'profound influence' led to what were known to Aboriginal people as 'Kartiya', or 'The Killing Times'. Under the euphemism of 'dispersals', Aboriginal people, including children, were chained by the neck, shot, poisoned and burnt until the twenty-seven different tribal groups representing between ten thousand to thirty thousand people (a quarter of the total number of Aboriginal people in Western Australia) were reduced to 'approximately' five thousand in less than two decades.

I think of the young man who hung himself with the inner tube of a tyre just before I arrived in that tiny community outside of Fitzroy Crossing in 2009, the hungry students asking for my seeds and salty plums, of our country's ongoing failure to 'Close the Gap' between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal life experiences. There seems to be a startling lack of commitment on the part of our nation to take responsibility for the violent crimes of the past as well as the intergenerational trauma this has meant for our country's first people.

[24] For more discussion on the Australian ideal of a 'Fair Go', please see the final chapter.

Kerr and Cox reveal that the dispossession forced upon Indigenous people through acts of state-sanctioned violence are not only an uncomfortable legacy of our colonial past. The authors argue these acts of dispossession are perpetuated into the present through ongoing 'confrontation, incarceration and assimilation' of our nation's first people. Through a focus on the violence toward protesters at Browse Basin on the Kimberley coast, the abuse of power used against the Noongar tent embassy in 2012 and the Western Australian Government's announcement in 2011 that it would amend the *Aboriginal Heritage Act*, Kerr and Cox demonstrate the way in which violence against Aboriginal people in Western Australia is perpetuated while simultaneously obscuring the accumulation of capital for both government and the private sector the violence affords.

Minjerribah woman and academic Aileen Moreton-Robinson's work *The White Possessive,* takes an even more scathing view of the relationship between capital, Indigenous dispossession and the law. Interestingly, Moreton-Robinson, repeatedly uses the term 'unsettl[ing]' in a very similar way to Gibson's 'haunting', to describe motivation behind the state's excessive desire to 'invest in reproducing and reaffirming the nation-state's ownership, control and domination' of Australia's First Nation's people. Moreton-Robinson argues that the possessive logic of white Australia is borne of a refusal to acknowledge Indigenous sovereignty. Therefore Indigenous sovereignty remains a deeply felt yet unacknowledged threat to white supremacy, motivating the ongoing need to dispossess Indigenous people of capital and power. This dispossession operates discursively and materially through a discourse of security. It is evident in racially-based and performative acts such as Howard's closure of the Office of Multiculturalism, the suspension of the Racial Discrimination Act during the Intervention, as well as the amendment of Native Title legislation (reducing rights enshrined in the original act), ensuring Australia remains a white possession.

Moreton-Robsinson also explores how white belonging is inextricably linked to the logic of capital, our investment is literal (in the economic sense), expressed through ownership, a claiming that renders invisible Indigenous ontologies of belonging that are both corporeal and symbiotic. This possessive logic of White Australia is then normalised through a pathologising of Indigenous people, blaming

them for their own disadvantage, rather than recognising the material consequences of land theft and colonialism, as well as the failure of the state to provide adequate care. The 'othering' of Indigenous people creates a discourse of fear based on a desire to control 'the enemy within', a rationalisation that then extends out to other non-whites who are perceived as a threat to white entitlement, as expressed in the White Australia Policy and Australia's harsh, and sometimes lethal, border policies.

We see the othering Moreton-Robinson critiques expressed through our disowning of places like Fitzroy Crossing in the Kimberley as Australian 'badlands', as well as the decision to legally excise places like Christmas Island from our sovereign obligations. Through these acts as white Australians, we distance ourselves from the violence that continues to allow our own privilege. We turn our eyes away from the fact that what we have has come at a cost of the lives of those at the border, for both 'non-citizens' at the watery edge of our nation, as well as the mentally excised spaces that are the home to many first Australians, the latter cutting us off from our centre, our country's heart.

So what must white Australians do to redress this situation? How do we shift our mythology away from the ideology of the insular? How do we create a different narrative in the hope of creating a different 'history'? Complex problems never have simple answers, but perhaps a starting point is be attentive to the myths we tell ourselves, as well as mindful of the stories we allow into our lives. Perhaps it is by learning to remember, even when the remembering is difficult, to listen and be attentive, not just to each other but to Country itself, that real change can come about. Gibson writes of his wild hinterland:

> I've found this place never stops teaching by surprising and disturbing. It offers hard lessons about a society recovering from colonialism. It can be disturbing enough—and beautiful enough—to goad us into thinking more boldly about how the past produces the present. This remembering is something good we can do in response to the bad in our lands.

However, it will not only be the Kimberley and Christmas Island that will teach me the importance of facing our nation's tendency for erasure and amnesia. As my plane begins to touch down nine hundred kilometres away from Christmas Island's beautiful and troubled monolith, I am about to learn that remembering is something vital to understanding the Cocos (Keeling) Islands as well.

Cocos (Keeling) Islands

'What the map cuts up, the story cuts across'

Michael de Certeau

18

West Island

(Pulu Panjang)

I have two distinct memories of my first arrival on Cocos in January 2012. The first is looking down from the plane at the view of West Island, where we were to live for the next two years, and bursting into laughter. I had never wanted to live on the Cocos (Keeling) Islands. As someone with a strong and consistent need for personal space, the idea of living on an island with a population of around ninety people, on a land mass half a kilometre wide at the widest point, terrified me. However, after the death of my father at the end of 2011 and Massom's attempted suicide, I reluctantly conceded I could no longer sustain my work with asylum seekers on Christmas Island. Yet the idea of returning to my former life on the mainland after all I had witnessed in the Indian Ocean Territories seemed impossible. My response to this challenge was to accept my husband's initiative to apply for jobs on the Cocos (Keeling) Islands, while simply and actively going into denial. Surely West Island is not as small as people said, I decided. Friends are exaggerating for effect, to make a good dinner party story. Or perhaps I misheard the conversations of Christmas Islanders, surely they were actually discussing one of the other twenty-six islets on the main atoll, not West Island where I was to live. In reality, I was sure I would find my new home was actually of a reasonable, habitable size.

My denial was so successful that I had forgotten about other people's descriptions of the atoll until the plane came into land. I looked down to see a land mass that looked more like a sandbar than a place to make a home. West Island was even more marginal than Christmas Islanders had described. Looking down, I had no

idea how I was going to cope with this new situation, but here we were, descending rapidly into another great adventure of miniature proportions.

My second memory is walking alone for the first time on the atoll, along the reef just past the runway. In the still of early morning, the sky was steeped in the deepest of blues. On the shore, palm trees reached long bodies toward the clear curve of a wave, their trunks forming a gentle arc over brilliant white sand. From water that appeared more like a shifting sculpture of glistening aquamarine, two turtles lifted their curious heads. A few metres from where I stood, an egret stepped cautiously, gracefully with her long, yellow legs through rock pools, looking for eels curled amongst the coral. There was not another human to be seen. I could barely comprehend the beauty in front of me, let alone understand that this paradisiacal place was my new home. After witnessing all the suffering and injustice on Christmas Island as well as my father's slow, cruel death from liver cancer, I could not make sense of my life, of why I had been given so much in a world marked by relentless and incomprehensible suffering. I broke down, falling onto my knees on the shore's soft sand, my shoulders wracked with sobs as I was consumed by a wave of gratitude and confusion. I cried with the relief of realising that despite my doubts, I *could* live here, that I had been gifted something extraordinary, almost unbelievable. Yet still I could not reconcile my good fortune with my new knowledge of what others had to endure, nor could I understand what it was that I was supposed to do now that I knew what my country was capable of. What was I to do with what I had seen? What was my responsibility to the asylum seekers I knew now?

I turn these memories over in my mind as the aircraft arcs over the atoll more than four years later, though today, having left Christmas Island in the late afternoon, the passengers and I do not arrive until sunset. The sun has already been consumed by the vast, liquid horizon, rendering the lagoon subdued, soft-hued, the islands transforming into dark shapes on a wide and shifting pastel palette. Over the lagoon a full, yellow moon begins to rise. As the passengers and I bounce along West Island's tarmac, I see two pilots standing beside a large military plane back-dropped by a lush forest of palm trees catching the last light. An ornate, bronze

rooster runs manically away from our plane toward the trees' protection. Today, arriving seems ordinary and surprisingly tranquil. I am grateful for the mundanity of the moment—forklifts and foyers, slow queues and just the slightest glimpse of moonlight leaning on the dark shape of the sea.

After making my way through Border Force checkpoints, I see the welcome sight of my good friend Emma, who is picking me from the airport. I make my way toward her, smiling and waving at familiar faces. Emma and I hug briefly, and I throw my bag in the back of the ute in the pub carpark like it is the most ordinary thing in the world. We drive the one hundred metres to where Emma and Pete's home sits just past the oval, its wide verandah looking west out over a shifting expanse of Indian Ocean. Soon we are sitting on their wide deck in the balmy, tropical warmth, drinking beers like no time has passed, though the addition of a tub spilling with children's toys and a bright plastic swing hanging from the rafters stand as small markers that, despite all the evidence to the contrary, time has indeed moved on.

In the morning, Emma and Pete's kitchen is abuzz with energy. Pete and Em are about to head off on holiday to Canada and mutual friends, Cara and Gav, have moved in as they are housesitting while Pete and Em are away. Cara and Gav's little blonde boy, Finn, has the gentle nature and tussled, bleached-blonde look of his surfer parents. He runs through the house with Pete and Em's curly-haired toddler, Tully, fists grasping pieces of toast, faces painted with Vegemite.

Pete is a big-hearted and well-liked high school teacher and surfer who stayed on the atoll after he fell in love with Emma. Emma has lived on Cocos Islands with her family on and off since she was a child. Now in her early thirties, she has established her adult life here on the atoll. Also a keen surfer and accomplished artist, Emma runs a gallery made from an old barge formerly used on Home Island before it was unceremoniously dumped amongst the coconut palms near North Point at the end of its working days. Emma and her Dad lovingly restored the old boat, and the Big Barge gallery is a testimony to their strong work ethic and meticulous aesthetics. Emma and I had worked closely together on the atoll as I was the art teacher at the district high school and Emma was an Artist in Residence on the same campus, converting washed-up thongs into a beautiful mural of a

traditional Cocos-Malay jukong sailing on the lagoon. Emma became pregnant just before I left, so I had never quite got my head around her being a mother. It feels remarkable to see her home like this, full of the bustle and life of young children. I watch the kids run around and can't help but be a little fascinated and amazed witnessing Pete and Emma patiently and tenderly talking with their young daughter. I begin to process that this striking young couple now really are a family.

I pack up my things and Emma drops me at my accommodation a few hundred metres down the road. As I haul my pack out of the ute once more and wave goodbye, a vague sense of elation begins to rise at my return to this small paradise, but I barely have a moment to process it. Knowing my time on Cocos was going to be limited I have planned ahead, and things are already in full swing. In forty-five minutes, I need to be at the school, where I have volunteered to run poetry workshops with the older students. I place my pack by the wardrobe and quickly dig around for pens, paper and my teaching notes, hearing the familiar chatter of white terns and crash of rolling surf, the sun reaching into the room between frangipani blooms. Armed with books and a tentative lesson plan, I run down the road toward the school. The swell looks magnificent in the early light and I know there must be turtles bobbing between the sets, but I cannot stop, don't want to be late, cutting cheekily down a path between two houses to save time.

When I step into the familiar space of the small, dim staffroom, I am greeted by a handful of faces I remember well, all busily readying themselves for the start of the school day.

'Hello Mak, welcome back!' Nek Namira calls as she continues making herself a sweet instant coffee from a small packet she keeps in her pigeonhole.

'Hi Nek,' I reply, happy to see my friend with an irreverent sense of humour is still keeping things lively in the school library.

'Hello, Mak!' I turn around as Pak Yati, one of the older, male education assistants comes in the staffroom door.

'Pak!' I say. 'It's been a while!' We laugh at the surprise of seeing each other again. Pak Yati was instrumental in helping to translate my poetry into Cocos Malay when I was on the islands, a gentle and affable leader in his community with a passion for fishing.

‘Wow, I heard you were coming,’ Pak says, ‘How is your family, how are Greta and Pak Greta?’

We chat for a while about our families while I start to register the many unfamiliar adult faces coming and going as everyone prepares for their school day. I am taken aback that there seem to be so many new members of staff; there are hardly any teachers and no administrators here I recognise and, for a moment, it dawns on me how the Cocos Malay must experience West Island. West Island houses the largely white population of public servants and teachers that come on two- or three-year contracts, while the Cocos Malay population of around five-hundred people live almost exclusively in Bantam Village on Home Island. As a West Islander, I didn’t really experience the transience of the white population directly as most of our friends came and left in approximately the same time frame. Now the warm but distant way with which the Cocos Malay largely related to us orang putis makes sense: there would be little motivation to invest deeply in friendships with the white population if you knew in a couple of years they were almost certain to leave.

Pak Yati makes a coffee and walks over to the classroom with me, as he works as an assistant in Pete’s room where I am about to teach. Entering through the bright blue door, I look up to see the faces of many students I know from when I taught art on the campus. I notice some of the girls, now a few years older, have started to wear colourful tudungs, or headscarves, some decorated with ornate silver jewellery. The bright cloth both contrasts and frames their dark eyes and olive skin, making the young women seem even more beautiful than before. Considering the almost three years I have been away, the students are surprisingly warm with me, and I am moved by their openness, especially as these students are high school aged, a time when many older children become less demonstrative. The students ask me eagerly for news of my daughter and I quickly update them, then we take our places and the class begins.

At first I am self-conscious teaching in front of Pete and Pak Yati. I have never mixed my worlds of teaching and poetry before—it feels strange. However, once I get the students writing and sharing their work, we all settle and get into our stride. After they have been writing for some time, I ask the students to read their

work to each other. They are shy but excited, and much to my delight, almost all the class members choose to share what they have written. I can see many students seem slightly taken aback by the work they have produced, perhaps surprised to find themselves enjoying, and relating to, poetry.

As I start to relax, I begin to feel more comfortable about sharing my own work with the students. I read a poem called *Pinggiran*[25], meaning 'margin', to the class.

'Some of the phrases are in Cocos Malay that Pak Yati and Mak Sofia helped me translate,' I explain after I have read the short work, 'to try and show how we move between languages here on Cocos. For example, the phrase 'Kehidupan belum tentu.' Who knows what that means in Cocos Malay? Who can translate the phrase into English?'

'Life is tenuous,' one capable student replies, and he looks slightly astonished, his mouth open in an expression of surprise as he angles his head like he is focusing intently. His eyes look straight into mine. Some of the students have gone quiet, and I am not sure if it is the experience of hearing creative works in their first language that has caught their attention, or whether they too experience their own mortality strongly in this island-scape. Either way, I sense a shift in the room, something has changed in the small crowd of faces looking back at me. In a school system where we were continually pushing the students to speak in English to increase their employment prospects, my gesture back to them in their first language feels like an intimacy, a gesture of respect that it seems is being returned.

Leaving the school, I am buoyed by what the students and I have shared. To return the poems I wrote on the island to these young islanders, and have the works openly received, is deeply satisfying. The school's new principal had hoped I would work with all students from years one to ten during my time here; however, we compromised on focusing on upper primary and high school students as I felt these students would get the most out of the sessions. Before coming to the Indian

[25] *Pinggiran* can be found in Westerly (see p224) http://fashiondocbox.com/Body_Art/71975645-Westerly59-2-the-best-in-writing-from-the-west.html. The complete collection of my poetry from Christmas Island and the Cocos (Keeling) Islands was published by UWA Publishing in 2018 https://uwap.uwa.edu.au/products/the-sky-runs-right-through-us .

Ocean Territories, I had offered to go into the schools on both Christmas Island and the Cocos (Keeling) Islands to run poetry workshops and share my work. I was upfront with both schools that my work spoke to the issue of asylum seekers amongst other themes, but my focus was to share my love of poetry with students and to get them writing about the unique place where they lived. While initially I was told that Christmas Island District High School would be happy for me to come into the classrooms and share my work with the students during my visit, none of my subsequent emails or messages were ever returned. I never got to work with the Christmas Island students or share with them poems about their island home. For me, this was disappointing but not at all surprising, the disparate responses a telling reflection of the contrasting cultures of two very different island populations.

Once back at my room, I start to unpack my things. My room is beautiful, filled with light, yet alarmingly close to the rooms beside me. Still, I can't hear anyone around, and the view from my room is of hibiscus glowing red, the foliage of banyan trees and frangipanis framing a bright slice of foaming sea. The day is getting warm and my excitement at getting back into this watery place is beginning to grow. I throw my sarong across the bed to make it feel more like home then walk to the bathroom to put on my bathers. In that lit space, as I slather myself in sun cream, once again the mirror confronts me with the disturbing brown mass that is growing on my shoulder from which the biopsy was taken. I had been so successful in putting the threat of cancer out of my mind, but here in a new space again on my own, I am forced to face this frightening possibility once more. I stop. A sick feeling rises in my stomach. I can't deal with it, I don't know what to do. There is nothing, nothing that I can do. I realise my results must be ready now, that I am supposed to visit the clinic, which is about a five-minute walk from my accommodation. Not today, I think, not today.

I examine my shoulder in the mirror in the bright sunlight coming through the blinds, but its mutated shape only makes me feel more anxious. I pull a t-shirt over my shoulders, taking the disturbing sight from my view, pull on my shorts and try to push the ominous feeling of my pending mortality away. There is so much to celebrate here, I can barely contain my joy, my sheer elation at having returned. In

this watery place I feel more grounded than ever—to be back on these islands on my own terms is incredible. I wander outside to the shed where the accommodation's website said I could access a bike. Beside a small laundry I see a stack of metal frames and I go in to the small building to have a look. On closer inspection I see two of the bikes have flat tyres, one is a child's bike and another has a chain stiff with rust. Too bad, I think, it's rust or nothing, and I pedal my way, straining against the bike's resistance on the low boardwalk through the tropical garden. Once out on Airforce Road I hit the trade winds howling over the runway and realise my idyllic memories were of Cocos in the doldrums, not in this howling wind that throws sand in my eyes, pushing me back, even as I strain against the rusty chain to propel myself forward.

Though the situation is ridiculous, I can't bear the thought of not being able to get to the bright waters at Pulu Mariah, and I strain against the chain and wind, telling myself it is good, I am wearing off the overconsumption from Christmas Island, which is just as well considering I am in place where you spend half your life in a bikini. I strain and strain, eyes stinging, sweating into full sun, until I finally hit a grove of the lush palms that line the road along the rest of the island. Palm fronds clap their hands loudly as wind tousles their lacquered canopy, but down here the breeze is calmed and a deep, moist shade falls across my skin. I stop and take it in, the luminous green of coconut upon coconut, palms iridescent with life, picturesque as a garden. The thin, sandy track winds between the coconuts' layered trunks, the most ancient palms reaching high into sky, long poles pushing into blue. A car comes bouncing along the track toward me and its passengers wave, snapping me out of my brief reverie. I peddle again, going faster without the wind's resistance, until through the gloss of fronds the view opens before me.

The tiny island of Pulu Mariah pushes above the sea, almost a caricature of itself: a small, contained mound of white sand rising from turquoise waters, covered in a jostle of coconut trees, at the foot of which the slightly dilapidated remains of a hut, or pondok, sit just out of view. Further out, the large arc of South Island helps create the atoll's distinct horse-shoe shape and, further still, toward the end of the of islets' curve, Home Island suggests itself in the thinnest of lines. A section of the

atoll only two metres above sea, this densely populated island is a ghost-scape from here, a wisp of sand barely visible above the salt spray of the lagoon.

I breathe slowly, take the scene I have memorised in. I step out from the shelter of the trees toward the water only to be hit hard once more by the wind. Fish gather around my toes in the coral in the shallow water; a small reef shark swims by. From here I can see a crowd of kite surfers carving lines of wake into the ruffled surface of the water further round the point. It is not the serene moment I anticipated, but it is enough to get my bearings. I have missed this place like one aches for family—here is a landscape of water where I was held. In the atoll's shifting, liquid embrace something in me was made whole. In the elbow of these islands, I found a place to belong.

19

The End of the Line

After my ride out to Pulu Mariah, I join Trish (my friend who I had bumped into at the airport on my way to Christmas Island) and her family for dinner at their home. Their children spill out over the verandah, laughing and talking; bright toys escape down stairs. We sit looking out over a lush garden of dense greenery through which the ocean shifts and glints in the last of the day's light. The table is filled with salads and fresh fish, warm bread and wine, and I am washed with a sense of gratitude at being welcomed into the heart of their family. Being here with Trish and Tony, I experience an irrational sense we are simply picking up where we left off. For a moment it feels like I have returned, as though I never really left, my old life about to resume. As we eat, I am struck by the openness of their children. It is in the softness of their faces, the animation in the lit windows of their eyes. The boys are steeped in the deep glow of those who know they are loved, articulate with a tongue born from being listened to, deeply, fully, repeatedly.

After dinner, as I am about to head off, Trish offers to lend me a less-rusted bike that she has stored in her shed. I feel excited at the idea of being able to get around more easily, in a way that I used to: riding along the beach at night coming home from friend's houses, whizzing alongside the runway at sunset after a game of tennis, peddling slowly on the way to work in the early morning, the sky wide and always an expansive sense of space and light. Trish wheels an old silver mountain bike into the yard and I thank her once again for her generosity. We embrace and I wave goodbye, deciding to ride the long way back to my accommodation. As I move along the road, my shadow speeds before me under the streetlights, morphing and moving. I watch this second-self for a moment, so clear and sharply defined, before the lights end and the image flickers, then slips away.

As I ride, I can feel I am starting to settle into a fresh way of inhabiting my old home. I am discovering a newly found sense of intimacy at being grounded, being sure, in and through the place itself. I feel steeped in the atoll, close as a

lover, held as a friend. The wind is warm and gentle on my skin, night air fragrant with the scent of salt and blossom. The moon has risen over the palms and its light catches the edges of thin cloud, is scooped into the smooth curve of a wave until it breaks, lit whitewash pure as snow. I turn the corner and ride into the darkness until I see the runway lights colourful and strange as an abandoned party, the lagoon invisible but darkly present behind. As I ride onto my old street, on the right my old home glows warmly, flickers with light from a television, volume turned down low. I feel strangely reassured by the life that continues at Number 23 without me; perhaps deep down, I want to know that I will leave.

Once back at my accommodation, I settle into bed, find myself staring at the cheap sea-themed prints on the wall: striped umbrellas, nautical knots, shells on yellow sand and frangipanis in white, wooden frames. The pictures are both relevant and irrelevant to where I find myself today (few nautical knots, plenty of sand, but not a yellow grain to be seen), causing me to feel slightly disorientated. I decide to try to familiarise myself with the alien space of my temporary home. I look though the wardrobes and cupboards, begin rifling through the reading material beside the bed. There are brochures for motorised canoe adventures, glass-bottom boat tours as well as kite surfing and scuba-diving. It is disconcerting seeing my former home through the lens of glossy brochures, so I pile the pamphlets together and stash them in a drawer out of sight. As I do, I glimpse the bright blue cover of a book that I immediately recognise. I stop, pull it out, sit up, and begin to flick through the thick pages of *The Clunies-Ross Chronicle*, an iconic text that recounts the atoll's history from the perspective of the founding family who ruled the tiny atoll from the early 1800s until the late 1970s. I never quite got around to reading more than a few pages of this book when I was on the islands, despite my interest in the atoll's history. Something about the tone of the *Chronicle* always made me feel uncomfortable. Glancing through the text again, looking at the series of black and white photos, I experience the same sensation. *The Clunies-Ross Chronicle* has a distinct air of 'boys' own adventure', all pilots and sailors, boats and planes, brimming with images of self-assured white men with moustaches.

This discovery forces me to ask myself for the first time why I am here, now, on the Cocos (Keeling) Islands. My need to go back to Christmas Island to come to

terms with my experiences was all-consuming, compelling, steeped in a drive both deeply personal and inescapably political. By contrast, the two years I spent on the Cocos (Keeling) Islands were largely peaceful—it became a time to recover and heal. I had good friends and plenty of time to begin the slow and ongoing process of unpacking what I had experienced, though both my studies at a university on the mainland as well as the daily alchemy that saw me turn my most difficult experiences into poetry. So why then (beside the gift of catching up with old friends) the desire to return?

The chance discovery of the *Chronicle* in my room has unwittingly begun to answer this question for me, it has scratched at an itch, this time more political than personal. I think back to Pete Ch'ng's reflections on the history of Christmas Island, when at the end of our interview he shared, 'I think Australia can still be a great country if it wants to be, or we can choose to be a mediocre country that stumbles along. But I think at the bottom of our history is race…and if we don't face that one…' On the Cocos (Keeling) Islands there is an overriding culture coming largely, but not only, from the Cocos Malay, of 'live and let live'. Conflict is avoided and grievances rarely stated, but this culture has led the atoll's complex history to remain largely a vague mystery for most white people on the atoll, including me. My experiences back in the Indian Ocean Territories this time around seem to be repeatedly teaching me that to understand my own story, I need to properly map the complex worlds where I have been. In doing so, I hope to find a way to make sense of the country where I live and who it is I have become.

The *Clunies-Ross Chronicle* immediately prompts me to follow a lead I had been avoiding in my own desire to avoid conflict. I pick up my phone and search for John Clunies-Ross on social media. My phone thinks for a while, the internet as always on island-time, but sure enough, eventually the image of a tanned, middle-aged man with wavy hair in a tropical shirt (no moustache) comes up. I don't know how he will feel about being asked to be interviewed. A larger than life, irreverent character with a well-established reputation as a barfly, I tended to deliberately avoid this man and his big personality. I don't know if we even spoke when I lived on the atoll, despite West Island's tiny population. Yet I sense John Clunies-Ross is more complex than he would have people believe.

John Clunies-Ross—or 'Johnny', as he is more commonly known—is the sixth-generation incarnation of a line of men sporting the family name. The original John Clunies-Ross was born in 1786 on the Shetland Islands in the north of Scotland, an incredibly beautiful and changeable island-scape, in which it was impossible to be more than five kilometres from the sea. This seemingly fearless young man with a love of the ocean set the tone for his descendants, embracing this wild terrain with its tumultuous and often violent ocean, becoming a capable seaman with an appetite for adventure.

It was this sea-faring ancestor who formed a working relationship with Alexander Hare, the atoll's original coloniser, working on his employer's sailing vessels and, though this connection, in 1826 found himself living on the Cocos (Keeling) Islands. Not much love was lost between the two men as they jostled for power, not only over this tiny arc of sand in the middle of the sea, but also over the acquisition of the labour force of illegally kept slaves predominantly from Malaysia, but also Indonesia, China, Papua, Africa and India—the original ancestors of the contemporary Cocos Malay. History has been told by the winner, and much has been made of the cruel and decadent habits of the loser. From 1834, the Clunies-Ross family began to lay claim to the tiny atoll of the Cocos (Keeling) Islands and its inhabitants, a family dynasty that continued for five generations. Under this feudalistic regime, the Clunies-Rosses were successful at establishing a coconut plantation for the production of copra utilising the labour provided by the Cocos Malay, as well as maintaining a significant family estate. The Australian government purchased the Cocos (Keeling) Islands in 1978, yet despite the end of the family legacy, the most recent incarnation of 'John Clunies-Ross' has decided to stay. I am intrigued to know what it means to remain in such a tiny community when the balance of power has shifted. What does it mean for Johnny to continue living with the people his family once ruled? What does his presence mean for the lives of the Cocos Malay, and what does the history of this tiny outpost, also excised by Howard in 2001, tell us about our nation?

I check the time—nine pm. Though this is well out of my comfort zone, I decide to take the chance, the worst that can happen is Johnny will refuse to meet or simply ignore me. I message Johnny, requesting his time for an interview, giving

him a very clear out. To my surprise, I get an immediate response: a matter-of-fact, 'Fine.'

'Come early,' he writes, 'when I'm having coffee, before I head out to the clam farm.'

'Great,' I respond, 'I will set my alarm.'

'Don't bother,' he responds, 'open your blinds.'

So I do and he is right, the sun wakes me at six thirty and the sound of the swell pours in thickly from the windows. All night its roar and sigh sang in my sleep and, as I open my eyes on this cloudless morning, I can see it foaming and shimmering in pale morning light. The white terns have woken and their early arguing and chattering filters down through high branches of figs and banyan trees. I make a bitter cup of International Roast from a thin, foil packet I find behind the kettle and carry it down to the seawall.

As I make my way to the water, I startle a rufous right heron resting on the road. She flies up, wide winged, long-legged into the branch of a frangipani tree. The swell is slowing now in day's gentle light and the white terns begin to wheel, setting their neat sails to the sky. I climb down the concrete of the seawall and sit where I had often sat outside our other former home here, the deputy's house (also known as 'Number 32') where Tina and Bob had taken over the garden after us. This long building with its large, wooden deck has grounds that ramble down to the sea, though it is harder to make out now someone has felled the tall coconut palms that softened the shore.

Down on the shore, caught between coral rocks and beached coconuts, I see the remains of what seems to be a Sri Lankan sleeping mat. I unroll it, and though it is frayed at the ends and seems melted in the middle, its colours are bright, the geometrics of its yellow and blue pattern clear. The Australian Border Force, once it has intercepted vessels in Australian waters, detains those aboard on its own ships, and routinely burns the beautifully coloured fishing vessels out at sea for reasons that are not always entirely clear. I presume this mat is from one of these burnt boats and that is why its fabric looks partly melted. I put the bright runner down, wondering what story it has to tell, then sit looking out toward the water. Sure

enough, as I wait, one, two, three turtles poke their heads above the surf. One distinctively curious turtle reaches his stumpy head high repeatedly between sets to look at me, then just as quickly he is gone, becomes a drifting, distorted shape before melding perfectly with the reef below.

My coffee is repulsive, but the morning is stunning, alive with colour and movement. Behind me, a small flock of terns are lit gold. Whirling above their white forms, I can see the slightly larger, darker shapes of common noddies. My whole body is singing, every cell alive to my return. It is as though the ocean, the birds are being breathed in through my skin. Salt pulses through my blood, spills in watery traces from my eyes. I am filled with the most enormous sense of wellbeing it makes me cry. I sit feeling clear, feeling calm and incredibly grateful to be alive. It is at this moment I remember again the ominous mark on my shoulder and my sense of resolution is immediate. I will not find out my results while I am on the atoll, I do not want to know. I need to be here, fully present in every sense, and the future, whatever it may hold, can wait. I feel my whole body palpably soften with relief. I have never felt more certain. I drink in the scene in front of me a moment longer, heart brimming with happiness, then I take my cup back to the house.

I am early, so I decide to walk the short distance to Johnny's home along the beach even though the tide is high. After walking behind a row of houses perched on the seawall, I climb down several rows of sandbags and hobble over coral rocks until I finally make my way to the water. There is a small fringe of sand above high tide that is kind on my feet, but every so often a surge of swell rushes in and I am sent running up the rocks, until the wave recedes and I can make my way to the softness of the shore once more. Toward the end of the small bay, sheoaks soften the water's edge and beyond them I can see palms stretching their lean bodies in a gesture like longing toward the sea. I make my way past the front of the medical centre and several tourist bungalows until I am looking up to the massive banyan tree I loved so much, which I can see the ocean is now threatening to claim. Finally, I reach the grounds of the motel and immediately notice the shore has been dramatically eroded. Rows of palm trees have fallen face-first into sand where they are slowly being reclaimed by the tide. I scuttle up the bank, holding onto a thick

matt of roots, then cut through the grounds to Johnny's place across from Cocos Autos.

As I make my way toward the faded fibro home, I am not sure what to expect, if Johnny will even be awake or if he has remembered that I am coming. As I approach, I see his white ute is still parked out the front, back number plate at strange angles, tray loaded with an odd assortment of boxes, ropes, tools and bags. His boat with its red, inflatable body sits parked by the front door. I can hear the TV is on, so I call out, open the flywire door and look inside.

In the front room, on a large, flat screen television, the Olympics is being discussed loudly by two men in tracksuits holding fat microphones. Above the television, there is a picture in a frame made from driftwood of John's son, Jack, jumping from a jetty with two girls in bikinis. An assortment of random objects covers the shelves, coffee table and floor. In the far corner there is a kitchen obscured by a cupboard and a wide, black bench.

'Coming,' Johnny calls from what, in most houses, would be a large pantry, but here seems to be a very small office. Johnny comes out naked from the waist up, all barrel chest and beer-belly, in a pair of black, Stubby-like shorts.

'Want a coffee?' I am hit by a rush of relief at the idea a that Johnny might have real coffee. My day seems to be taking a turn for the better.

'Oh, yes please,' I answer quickly.

'Cup or a bucket?'

'Cup's fine,' I smile, relieved the hellos seems to be over.

'May as well get dressed,' Johnny says as he pulls on a red, cotton T- shirt laying on the lounge and then he hands me a large, steaming cup. I am buoyed by such good fortune, close my eyes, breathe the aroma of fresh coffee in and try and look like I am feeling relaxed about being here on my own with him.

We chat for a bit about who has had babies and things that have changed or stayed the same before I grab my folder and find the consent forms I need him to sign. He seems a little taken aback by this and as I am quick to assure him it is a formality. I am keenly aware of the damage the media has done on the islands and I want to earn his trust. I tell him I will type up the transcript and that he can change anything he feels doesn't seem right. Johnny seems reassured by this and we chat

for a while about the anger caused by an SBS documentary about education, the unfair slant it put on many people's words and its misrepresentation of a complex situation. I wonder if I am in danger of doing something similar, whether my words will cause hurt, anger or a sense of betrayal. I finish my coffee, find my questions and turn on the recorder.

I ask Johnny about his childhood and see his shoulders tense, his tone becomes perfunctory. He tells me he was born in Singapore, 'back when that was the closest hospital.' His mother had lost her first child and I wonder how long this was before Johnny was born. I imagine him now as a small boy running through the kampong, barefoot and free-range, living a life of incredible privilege. Yet Johnny's childhood on his tropical island home was short-lived. As with generations of Clunies-Ross males before him, Johnny was sent away to Europe to study, his turn at age four. Johnny was first flown to Ireland to start his early childhood schooling, then when he was primary-school aged, he was sent to England where he was joined by his mother. Johnny would return to visit the atoll every second year and his father would visit in the year between. I want to ask more about what it was like to grow up in such an idyllic setting surrounded by family, only to find yourself whisked so far away at such a young age, but everything in Johnny's body language, the way he averts his eyes and flattens his tone, tells me not to go there. I can't help but think about how the sense of physical and psychological distance from what that very young Johnny Clunies-Ross loved so much, has shaped the man sitting before me today.

'How was it when you returned to Cocos?' I ask.

'Oh, it was like Narnia,' Johnny replies, visibly lightening and becoming animated, 'You just get into this tube and it flies and you get out here and, you know, you pinch yourself for the first few days and then eventually you start thinking of it as normal, just in time to get back on the plane to go to some institutional place where you have to wear shoes again.' I smile, glancing at the broad, brown feet pointing toward me from under the coffee table.

'I was expected to come back here,' Johnny continues, 'I was the eldest son, I don't think it was ever talked about. I studied boat building with the concept being

that I would pick up the new technologies, fibreglass and welding, and bring them into the community. So I did that and when I came back to the community I was put through rapid apprenticeships. I worked with the Cocos Malay bush crew, which is the biggest mob, picking up coconuts and clearing up the plantations, then moved onto boat and machine maintenance and then ferry driving and stevedoring.'

'Did you just stay from that point on,' I ask, 'or have you come and gone from the atoll since then?'

'Well then we had the big fight with the Commonwealth, about my family owning all the land, when I was in my twenties. So the old man sold up, which basically left me without a job so I had to leave for Perth. The old man technically went bankrupt because the Commonwealth Government fought with him for so long.'

There were rumours on West Island that the Australian government had been incredibly aggressive in its treatment of the Clunies-Ross family in the acquisition of the Cocos (Keeling) Islands in the late seventies. Hearsay during my time on the atoll was that the Australian government had also deliberately orchestrated events that ensured the failure of the family's shipping company, resulting in the estate's bankruptcy, in order to force the family off Home Island and gain exclusive power over the atoll. Certainly, as I found myself later, finally reading the *Clunies-Ross Chronicle*, the implication that the Australian government conspired against the Clunies-Ross family is clear. Somehow this history helps makes sense of the irreverent figure before me, his strange mix of cynicism and straight-upness, his consistent distaste for authority.

I ask Johnny if these rumours were true, if he feels the Australian government was aggressive in the way they took over the atoll.

'Oh yeah, they were spiteful and mean,' he answers. 'I think if people did things in their own name they would not have done anything quite so nasty, but they were doing it on behalf of the Commonwealth and most of the people I bumped into around that era who know what happened apologised to me for the behaviour of the government toward me and my family, so it was not a very nice time.'

As Johnny speaks, I can almost see my mental picture of this family's feudal regime starting to alter, taking on dimension and become more complex. Here, in this version of the story, the ruler becomes the underdog, the master the victim, and I don't quite know whose team I should be on: the Clunies-Ross's, the Cocos-Malays' or the Australian government's. Was it possible, or even appropriate, that I resist the urge to take sides?

'What about the Big House?' I ask him, referring to the family mansion, Oceania House, on Home Island's waterfront. The estate was once surrounded by extensive, walled gardens made possible by importing soil by boat from Christmas Island nine hundred kilometres away. Since the family was forced to sell the estate, the gardens have become ramshackle and uncared for, far from their former glory. 'It's a shame to see it so run down…'

'It is not part of the community anymore. We used to have New Year's there and Hari Raya, parties, and a fair amount of produce came out of the garden for the community—ah, times go, you know,' he says with an air of grief and resignation.

'To run a private house like that is stunningly expensive and you need staff. You can't have a house like that without at least two people helping you keep the dust out of the place and so that is eight thousand dollars just in dusting. Then the toilets break, the whole thing just becomes…' Johnny's voice starts to trail off. 'It is built as a manager's residence who has got a lot of labour in a third-world situation where the labour is not worth a lot of money. We had, like, seven gardeners, four house girls and could call on all the tradies as well.'

Suddenly, my impression of Johnny alters again. The shift in understanding and allegiance I am experiencing is both confusing and fascinating. With this statement, the seemingly harmless man sitting before me has unapologetically admitted the labour conditions his family created for the Cocos Malay were incredibly inequitable, 'third world' in Johnny's own terms. I wonder if Johnny realises he has just conceded that his family, rather than freeing the slaves that had belonged to Hare, instead grossly underpaid the Cocos Malay people in their care in order to support the family's privileged lifestyle. Indeed, in the *Clunies-Ross Chronicle* it proudly states that every Cocos-Malay woman was required to serve an 'apprenticeship' in the Clunies-Ross household, working as a family maid in order to

‘learn the domestic arts’. I try to look as unflustered as possible about his remarks. I know if I directly challenge Johnny I may lose his trust, he may close up, and there is so much more I want to know. I decide to move the conversation on.

‘Do you think you will always live here?’ I ask.

‘Yep, my boots are already buried, mate,’ he says as he puts down his coffee. ‘Not on Home Island, mind you, there’s heaps of room in Mum’s box. He cremated her, so…’

Johnny reaches over and tops up my already large coffee, ‘You can brush your teeth with this stuff…’ he says.

I decide to ask Johnny what I have wanted to know all along: *why stay*? Knowing his family has been forced from the atoll, losing their business, home and the Cocos Malay workforce, why return—why is it that Johnny chooses to stay?

‘I don’t have a concept of living anywhere else,’ Johnny tells me. ‘I would be lost in the suburbs. If I get in a situation where I can’t see very far, like if there are hills blocking the view, or a house or a tree, I get a bit twitchy,’ he laughs. ‘This is a much more natural environment for me. During the day I can see the moon, I have a point of reference. I keep an eye on the moon. I generally know the moon phase over the next couple of days and then you find yourself in an environment where you don’t know what phase the moon is in, you don’t even see the bloody thing! The city is a construct; this is real.’

Though days glide past in a kind of dream-haze on this slow-paced, tropical island far away from the lived reality of modern life, I can’t help but agree. There is something in-your-face about each islander’s dependence on the natural world and each other that pares things back here, confronts you and makes you honest with yourself while forcing you to be tolerant of, and largely accountable to, others.

‘Here everyone knows who you are and you have a responsibility to the greater community outside your door.’ Johnny continues, ‘It is the freedom—you have your own boat, you can go fishing and catch your own food, which some people find quite confronting, but if you can’t catch your own food you have a distance from it, you know? And it is a great place to have children, an amazing place to have children. Everyone loves your children as much as you do, pretty much, and they disappear for hours on end and they come back okay and probably

have a new shirt on. I was a single parent for a while, everyone on West Island was really supportive of me and my family were two doors down and I suppose at this end of my life it is more about relevance and how you fit into the puzzle.

I am only just now reintegrating with the Home Island community, you know there was a long period where it was politically incorrect to be integrated, there was a resentment in the community. I really enjoy my friendship with the Homies (Home Islanders) and, you know, we just take the piss out of each other all the time and it is quite robust in that way.'

'Your father must have been devastated when he left,' I say.

'Oh, it broke his heart. He won't come back, it is too much.'

I ask how Johnny's long connection with Cocos affects him now. He tells me there was a heavy pressure on him as he grew up to take things over, including the Clunies-Ross own on-island magisterial system set up to resolve island disputes. He tells me it was almost a relief when his time to take on the role of ruling Home Island never came to bear. Before the acquisition of the atoll by the Australian government, Johnny's father would get up every morning and walk around the kampong, establishing a time when anyone could approach him for advice or help. Johnny was slowly seconded into that role and the Cocos Malay came to see him as a figure to confide in.

'You were the father of the community; it was more than paying the wages. The social fabric was polished and maintained by my family.'

I ask if Johnny if part of him wishes he could have taken on that responsibility, that role. He skirts around my question, expressing his frustration at the co-op, the council, the business sector and the skewed political system that sees the islanders having to choose between political candidates in the Northern Territory.

'There is no statesman, no spokesperson. No one person,' he laments.

'So being able to perform that role would be a satisfying one?' I ask.

'Well I think it would be politically effective as well as satisfying — to say this is the community's view on that, we have had our discussion and here we go, you know. I mean, it's a heavy one, but having said that, if the authority line was clearer

and someone said, 'Look, I have to deal with the Cocos Islands, who do I deal with?' and the line of authority was clear…'

Johnny starts becoming agitated as he discusses his frustration with government organisations, and as he does, I begin to notice he starts to use the term 'us', referring to himself and the Cocos Malay. This is an interesting shift, so I encourage him to speak more, trying to work out what the implications of such an identification could be.

'The wider community can be very bullying. Parks Australia, they believe they are in the absolute right, but there are ways and means of doing it without being white, colonial bastards.' I look up to see if there is any sense of irony or play in Johnny's expression, but can read none.

'And that tends to be the track, you know: we are right, the tree hugging university, you guys don't know what you're fucking doing, and this is the way we are going to go. There has been a fair bit of that going on. We had a barney with Fisheries because they wanted to put fish limits in, which doesn't really suit us—if we have a wedding, you know, it is open slather. Everyone goes out and supports the wedding, catches fish, we eat more, we eat gong-gong and everyone puts in for two households and they fish day-long. And they say, "Oh no, you can't have them because we have introduced catch limits," which is foolishness. They haven't listened to us. I have had two years of previous conversations with Fisheries and they haven't listened to a thing we have said.'

There are so many things to tease out from this statement, the least of which is the fusion between Johnny's sense of self and the Cocos Malay community. It is true the Cocos Malay elected Johnny to Council, but this and other statements he has made during the interview, as well as the repeated use of the term 'us', referring exclusively to himself and the Cocos Malay, indicate to me that for Johnny Clunies-Ross the boundaries between himself and the Cocos Malay are still not clear. Johnny identifies with the Cocos Malay, but do they identify with him? Is he speaking for the Cocos Malay simply as a councillor, or are some intergenerational habits of appropriation resurfacing as he takes on his leadership role?

I look at my phone and realise that Johnny and I have been talking for almost two hours. I feel like we are only beginning to touch on some of the most important

questions of his role on the islands, yet I am beyond trying to take in any more. I did not realise listening could be so demanding, the constant act of being out my comfort zone, reading the situation, the person, trying to think on my feet. Reluctantly I turn the recorder off and pack my things away. We continue to chat for a while longer about the role of Fisheries, bureaucrats and climate change.

'Yes, well none of that has been proven beyond doubt, has it?' Johnny says.

'You don't believe in global warming?' I ask, both surprised and not surprised by the possibility.

'Well the jury is out, isn't it? They say they have asked all the scientists, but they haven't asked all of them, so there isn't consensus, no one can say for sure one way or another. If you asked all the scientists, of course you are going to get a range of opinions, but they can't ask everyone. They haven't asked me, for example.' Again, I wait for a hint of irony, but there is none, perhaps just a hint of self-consciousness.

'But you are not a scientist, Johnny,' I say.

'Well…' he seems a bit taken aback at my directness and I try to hide my astonishment, surely he must be joking, but I am not convinced, I don't think he is. I realise for all the humbling blows his family has taken, John Clunies-Ross is still a big fish in a very small pond. I decide to take the conversation back to safer ground. The interview has gone so well and I am really enjoying getting to know this complex character better. I ask Johnny if he will take me out to see his clam farm. I had never got around to seeing it during my time on the islands and had heard his collection of creatures was really something quite unique.

At my suggestion, Johnny jumps up to get his things together. I ask to use the toilet before we head off and he points toward the hallway.

'The centipede is dead, by the way, I just haven't gotten rid of it,' he calls as I get up off the couch. Once again, I am not sure if he is joking, but soon see its dark, scaled form, the length of a child's ruler laying on the lino in a back-to-front 'S', its head disfigured, I am guessing by the force of one of Johnny's thongs. As I continue down the hall, a small, ginger cat jumps from a bunk in one of the bedrooms and begins to smooch my ankles emphatically. It follows me into the tiny room and I am not sure what to do, so I go to the toilet with the door half-closed while the cat

continues to rub its face passionately over my feet. The cat follows me out as I wash my hands in the bathroom's greying sink under which a chipboard cupboard slowly buckles, returning to the earth.

I give the cat one last pat and Johnny and I walk out to the car. Johnny has had to wire the driver's door shut as the police complained about him driving around with it open, so he has to enter the car from the passenger side and I follow in behind him. As we drive off, I notice I can see the road running beneath my feet through several holes in the rusted floor, and I smile to myself, happy to be here, happy that Johnny has been willing to give me a window into his distinct, even if idiosyncratic, view of the world.

As we head along the one and only road that runs along the fourteen-kilometre stretch of West Island, a Cocos-Malay man comes toward us from the opposite direction in a large roadwork vehicle. There is only enough room for one vehicle on the asphalt, so Johnny veers suddenly off into the grass, sending feral chickens flying madly into the palm trees. Back on the bitumen, an opulent jungle fowl sways his magnificent, richly plumed tail as he walks quickly to get out of our way. Palm trees lean intimately over us along the road, sheltering us from the trade winds that continue to hammer the atoll.

We turn into the farm and bounce along the white, sandy track until Johnny pulls the car up in space cleared between low coconut trees. I get out of the passenger side so Johnny can get out of the car, and I turn to see an array of rectangular ponds lined with thick, black plastic. White PVC piping carries water between the tanks and several metres away, through the greenery, I can see the swell rolling in.

I walk up to the first pond and am taken aback by the sheer brilliance of the sight in front of me. The stark, black pond reveals itself as a luminous, fleshy terrain. The bubbling water is filled with vibrant beings. Each creature is about the size of two large, cupped hands, voluptuous and patterned with iridescence: electric blues, greens and browns, each clam holding its own unique and intricate design.

'These are about thirteen or fourteen years old,' Johnny tells me. '*Tridacna derasa*, or smooth giant clam. They are quite rare.'

The clams close slightly as I move toward them. They are larger than life, improbably bright, a living, breathing palette of fluorescence that somehow senses my presence.

'They change colour depending on where you stand,' he adds, and we walk around so the angle of light changes. It is hard to grasp that these are living creatures, each being like a rippled sculpture in its own right.

'Over here are a different type. *Tridacna maxima*: fluted, or burrowing clam. These are the ones we sell the most of, but they are much younger, just a few years old. You've got to watch the heat too. It can be a killer.'

I am taken completely by surprise once again, this time by the sheer quantity of creatures as well as the diversity of colour and design. Considerably smaller, the burrowing clams fill pool after pool, tightly packed together like a piece of luminous, abstract art. Johnny lends me his camera and I photograph them, homing in on line, pattern and contour.

We walk back to the first pool with the large clams and I notice I can see right into the body of some through a small hole, and it is hard to avoid seeing the vulva-like resemblance in their shape, their long and rippled fleshy slits. I don't mention this as I lean over the pond, but it is like the man reads my mind.

'So if you've never had the opportunity to have a lesbian relationship, here's your chance,' Johnny calls over his shoulder as he grabs a container from the ute.

I laugh, refusing to blush, 'Yep, only on Cocos!'

'And what happens on Cocos stays on Cocos,' he says, smiling wryly, and goes off to flush out the PVC piping. I dip my hand down into the water and gently touch the side of an ancient-looking clam with patterns in shades of brown and intricate as lace. The sensation is different to what I expect, more resistant, rubbery, not as soft as it seemed to the eye. The clam does not slam shut as I feared, but closes slightly, as if politely asking me to go away. With growing confidence, and rudely ignoring the clam's seeming request, I touch another and it feels strangely intimate. I find myself filled with a surge of tenderness for these exquisite, sentient creatures.

Johnny returns from his pipe work and gets inside the car through the passenger door, so I follow. Soon we are bumping our way past his beehives in

polystyrene stacks, past a rusting, old bus amongst beach cabbage until we bounce off the white, sandy drive and onto the road.

The clams have made me quiet, their strong, silent presence lingers in my mind as we leave. I watch the palms flash past, keeping a lookout for the herd of resident wild goats, until Johnny takes a sharp left, turning off the main road and onto the track out to The Farm. In a previous life, before my time on the atoll, The Farm had been an abundant market garden of sorts run by another local man, providing the island with a small bounty of much-needed fresh produce. However, a cyclone had arrived and destroyed the entire area. The farmer's wife left the farmer and then the embattled farmer left his farm, and the once-bountiful hub of activity became a shell of itself, a few sheds and a stand of fruiting lime trees the only trace of a small chapter in the West Island's history. Johnny, along with Trish's husband, Tony, are now working to try and restore The Farm back into a productive space.

About fifty metres in, we pull up to an old greenhouse where Johnny takes me to see his hydroponic garden. Once inside, the old structure is green with new life. Zucchini vines weave their way through beds, and tomato plants are staked between kale, orchids and chilli. In this unfolding show and tell, Johnny then leads me out to a field that was once a plain of beach cabbage, where a crop of dwarf bananas now grows, blue bags tied tightly over their ripening fruit. It is heartening to witness a modest abundance returning to this weed-ridden block, to see care and attention breathing life back into a space that had once helped feed an atoll.

We climb into the car and head back to Johnny's place. I feel at ease next to him in the ute now, the asphalt whizzing visibly by beneath my feet, palm trees and surf a blur of blues and greens outside my window. With the sun on my face and wind in my hair, it strikes me what an incredible privilege it is to have time and the means to talk to people whose lives were on the outskirts of my own during my brief time on the atoll. I wonder how I will tell Johnny's story, whether that is even possible and if it is my place to do so. How will his story be challenged or affirmed when I finally sit down to talk with Nek Su? The Clunies-Ross's legacy is a complex one and I am not here to umpire. Perhaps all I am doing is bearing witness to a series of moments, picking up fragments to hold to the light. Perhaps all we ever

have are these weathered shards, only ever the idea of a whole; we tessellate, place pieces together and hope that a picture, a story, will form.

As I go to leave, I take a leap and turn to hug Johnny goodbye. It feels right, no longer awkward, it is relaxed and warm between us. He heads inside and I walk back toward the beach side of the island to make my way home. When I reach the shore, I can see the tide is low, leaving only a glaze of water over the exposed reef. The swell still rolls in steadily in the distance but walking back is easy and quick as the retreating ocean has left a wide expanse of compact sand. I glimpse a young black-tipped reef shark, around half a metre long, moving deftly, dark sail high, through the clear film of water. I have seen these tiny sharks often, but in this moment suddenly realise these miniature creatures are perfectly designed for precisely this. Untroubled by the extremes of low tide, the shark scoots through the shallow water, alarming a school of sweetlip, their translucent bodies momentarily visible as they flash in sun.

Just before I reach my accommodation, my eyes are snapped sharply back to shore by a snake-like movement that jolts my whole body. I turn and realise what I have seen is, in fact, an eel moving between rock pools, coming in and out of vision as she scours the reef. Her liquid movements are breathtaking to witness as she feeds and curls, all action and intent. As my gaze follows her, she wraps her body around several small knolls of reef, raises her head, watchful and alert, then moves to another, carving a path from sea to shore. As the eel reaches the edge of the ocean, she snakes over the sand and, to my surprise, moves completely away from the water—half serpent, half fish, silver and glossy, weaving, glistening across the sand's semi-dry surface. She is right on the border, zig-zagging between the dual worlds of land and water, fluid and strong, an inhabiter of in-betweens, always watching, reading, pushing her muscular body into sand, carving out her sinuous path. Back and forward she goes in the littoral zone, swimming through shore, snaking in and out of the clear lip of lapping sea. Then suddenly, I am the one seen and the eel becomes a magician, quicksilver, becomes one with the water. I search for her body, eyes scouring the rocky shore, but her art is honed—she leaves no trace.

20

Quarantine

All morning the military planes have been arriving. The great hiss of them after they land, their long, insect-high whine, again wakes in me a familiar rage. I get up from the table where I have been reading, grab the bike Trish has lent me and set out toward the runway. As I arrive, the mighty craft turn their grey bodies. The noise deafening, drowning out the existence of all other sounds. They are dull and angular, menacing and enormous, and with the sight of them, the sound of them, memories come crowding into my mind.

When we first arrived on the Cocos (Keeling) Islands in 2012, the arrival of asylum seekers was almost unheard of. No Navy vessels hovered on the horizon and no Customs officers scoured the sea from shore. The Australian Border Force had not even been invented. There was no camp in which people could be detained and few military planes arrived growling on the unfenced runway. Islanders were happy to discuss what was happening on Christmas Island nine hundred kilometres away, their conversations consistently framed by compassion. On the whole, I experienced the perspectives of Cocos Islanders as refreshingly welcoming and open. After my experiences on Christmas Island, to experience a population as tolerant and accepting by nature, came as an incredible relief. On the sixteenth of May 2012, the first of what was to be an influx of arrivals continuing for the next few years arrived on a warm, star-lit night. The police station, never lit, now glowed with a strange tungsten light. The airport was unfamiliar, eerily radiating from within. Airport staff milled around inside, looking like shadowy strangers, silhouetted by the stark, fluorescent lights. People I thought I knew pulled white paper masks down over their faces.[26]

The community was intrigued. The asylum seekers were housed in the pub that also served as a cyclone shelter. I worried what would happen if some West

[26] Until this incident, I had never seen paper masks worn by people processing asylum seekers.

Islanders couldn't order a beer. A community cricket match was organised to welcome the new arrivals—the sporting locals were excited to see how the Sri Lankan men bowled. From the bus window, the Cocos Malay schoolgirls pressed their faces to the glass, searching, pointing at the young Tamil men through the window, giggling and laughing, uncharacteristically animated and loud.

Though my time on the Cocos (Keeling) Islands was far more peaceful, and my witness of what happened to asylum seekers in the name of border protection on the atoll largely distant, as more boats arrived, I became increasingly concerned as the tone of the island changed. West Islanders wanted their bar back. Johnny Clunies-Ross approached the media complaining that locals, excluded from the pub by the makeshift camp, could not access the wide screen television to watch the State of Origin game. Another temporary camp was opened at the island's old quarantine station, the locals got their pub back, but people were unsettled. The Cocos Islanders had seen what had played out on Christmas Island, the price the people paid as their small community was swamped by fly-in fly-out workers, Serco officers, media, Customs and federal police. Cocos Islanders were used to flying under the radar, being far from the mainland's gaze. No one wanted the influx of officials, the spotlight or territorial enactments unsettling their daily lives. Most of all, no-one wanted a camp.

At tennis on Wednesday nights I would hear nurses whispering behind their hands. I strained to make out their hushed conversations about the people they had treated, asylum seekers whose legs had been crushed between boats during rescue operations and other details I could not hear. An airforce worker mentioned to me between serves his job was no longer to assist with rescues, but to monitor the fate of those whose boats began to flounder at sea. On West Island's oval, where games of cricket were once played, asylum seekers were now made to sit in straight lines with their heads facing the runway as they awaited their charter planes for processing on Christmas Island. A Serco officer walked close to the men's bodies along the long and silent rows, his presence a clear effort at intimidation, forcing the men to avert their faces from the road, from the islanders' view. Life jackets, passports, pieces of boat and children's shoes washed up on the atoll's shores. On

the horizon, thin plumes of smoke rose where Customs burned the bright fishing boats on which the asylum seekers had arrived.

I felt saddened that the tolerant and accepting community that I lived in had started to exhibit similar signs of fear, and occasionally even hatred, as the community I had left on Christmas Island. Was this what humans did when placed under pressure, when faced with the reality of an influx of vulnerable people in their own backyard? To try and counter this, all I could do was wave. Hearing the charter planes warming their engines, I would race from my desk out onto the unfenced runway immediately outside my home, holding my arm high, moving my hand in a slow motion salutation, willing that even one act of goodwill or welcome could counter at least something of the prejudice they may face. But I wanted so desperately to do more.

Every time a boat arrived on the Cocos (Keeling) Islands, I would muster false courage, load my car with paints, paper, dress-ups, toys, textas, puppets and pencils and drive down to the old quarantine station to volunteer to help. Every time I was by met by the same Serco officer in a crisp, blue shirt and closely cropped hair, two slits holding the distant window of his eyes. My whole body would sink at the sight of him. I didn't even know his name. I doubt that he remembered mine, but every few months we would have this routine face-off, going through the same tense motions.

As the new arrivals sat looking on in the distance, I would ask the Serco officer if I could help, if I could work with the children sitting behind him in the shade of the tree. Each conversation, I would remind the officer that teaching asylum seekers was my job on Christmas Island. Each time the officer would attempt to find a new reason not to let me through. He would tell me I needed to have a Working with Children check. I would tell him I had a Working with Children Check. He would tell me I need a Serco ID number. I would tell him I had a Serco ID number. He would assert that I would need to get clearance a week in advance, but we both knew this was a farce, asylum seeker boat arrivals never came with notice. The Serco officer would assert bluntly that they didn't want too many people involved, that asylum seekers were not here to be entertained, that they should not be rewarded for coming by boat. The children sat within in earshot, waiting, sitting

in the dirt. The Tamil families would watch me walk in with my tubs of toys, then minutes later, they would watch me carry my bright offerings out.

In the weeks between boats, I worked on my Tamil. I stood in front of the mirror and rolled the language's new sounds around on my tongue, 'Vanakkam, eppadi irukinga?' I asked myself, 'Eppadi Irukinga?' 'Oh, Naan Nalla Iruken,' I'd answer nonchalantly, but it never sounded quite right, so I would play the phrase back on my phone's app, trying to get the strange sounds right.

One afternoon as I drove out to the beach on my scooter, I slowed down past the quarantine station where I could see the Sri Lankan people sitting in groups in the shade. I waved and a few hands waved back. Green jungle fowl ducked through holes in the wire fencing; white terns circled and called. A waterhen darted frantically across the road, causing me to brake, then disappeared into the beach cabbage. I dragged my eyes back to the road and continued to drive on. An hour later, when I rode back after my swim, the people had gone into tents or into the ageing brick foyer. I watched and waited for the day when the officer with the cropped hair and hard eyes would move on.

On the third of April 2013, a boat arrives in the lagoon on the Cocos (Keeling) Islands with around eighty asylum seekers on board. I hear from other islanders that Immigration has been caught off guard, that they do not have enough officers on the ground, enough clothes or food, the camp brimming with their sudden bodies. I know this is my chance. I load the Hilux once more with my tubs of toys and art materials.

'Do you think they will let you in this time?' Ash asks me, watching me from the shade of the verandah, toothbrush still in his hand.

'No,' I reply.

Ash smiles at me, wishes me good luck and heads back inside to get ready for work. I drive along the thin, winding asphalt, beneath the palm trees that sway under cottonwool cloud, until I arrive at the wire-fenced paddock that marks the beginning of the quarantine station. I pull up under the frangipani tree next to the administration building, feeling my heart quicken in my chest. As I step out of the car, the people from the boat watch me curiously, shyly, so I wave. Their faces

brighten, smiles flash across their strikingly unfamiliar faces. Children look at me and then at their parents.

I walk up to the foyer, where I can see the glass doors have been opened to the breeze. Several officers sit inside at trestle tables with individuals or pairs of new arrivals, talking quietly and filling in a variety of forms. I can't see the man in the blue shirt anywhere. My heart beats emphatically in my chest. I push away the guilty feeling I am doing something wrong.

A young man in a beige Department of Immigration and Culture shirt looks up and catches my eye.

'Oh, hi,' I say, smiling as confidently as I can, 'I am the art teacher at the local school here, and I was just wondering if you needed a hand, if maybe I could run some activities with the kids?'

'Oh, that would be great!' he replies, 'the poor kids are getting so bored, we haven't got anything to give them except a couple of soccer balls and a cricket bat.' I feel my body soften with relief, then the officer seems to suddenly catch himself. 'Except it's not up to me, it's actually up to my boss. I will introduce you.' I feel the tension return to my body as we walk across the crowded foyer's bare concrete floor toward a corner at the back of the room where a woman, perhaps in her early fifties with shoulder length hair, is talking to another officer.
'Carol, this lady is a teacher at the school here and wanted to know if we would like a hand with the kids.'

'Hi, I am Reneé.' The woman steps toward me and we shake hands.

'I said I thought it would be good because they are starting to go a little crazy with nothing to do,' the young officer says by way of explanation.

'That could be a great help,' the woman replies, 'what do you teach?'

'I teach art one day a week,' I tell her, 'but I used to teach the asylum seeker kids English on Christmas Island when I was there a year ago.'

'Thank you for coming in—except we don't really have much you can work with.'

'Oh, that's okay,' I reply, 'I have brought some resources with me, paints and crayons and things, they're in the car. I just wanted to check with you first.'

‘Great, then!’ Carol says, ‘Dan, could you give Reneé a hand? Reneé, are the trestle tables outside okay? It is a bit windy, but we don’t have any other room.’

‘Perfect, thank you,’ I reply.

I can hardly believe my sudden good fortune. Dan wanders with me back to the car while I try to digest that no-one has asked me for a single piece of documentation, demanded any kind of notice, or made me fill in any forms. I am stunned.

‘Hey, thanks so much for coming in,’ Dan says, interrupting my thoughts.

As we walk back to the car, I see the man in the blue Serco shirt walking toward the foyer. He looks toward me and the young Immigration officer, his expression seems to hold a mixture of anger and defeat. He turns his gaze away. We carry the tubs out to the tables watched by fifty or sixty curious eyes in the shade, or from the makeshift field were the children playing soccer. Some of the younger children start to walk at our sides. I look down and smile deeply into their eyes, and the children beam my warmth straight back.

‘Look, look!’ an older boy calls, pointing into the clear tub, ‘I can see a toy!’ Soon more and more children begin to run over as we place the tubs down and I try to think through the logistics of the situation. Dan helps me set up four trestle tables where the children will need to sit shoulder to shoulder in order to fit. I laugh to myself at the irony of being told I could not work with the five or six children that had come on previous boats, but here I was gifted more kids than I know what to do with.

‘Thanks Dan,’ I say.

‘Are you okay? I just really should get back to helping inside.’

‘Yeah, sure, thanks heaps,’ I reply. Dan walks quickly back into the crowded foyer to where the adult asylum seekers are being interviewed.

The parents come around and settle small groups at the tables, rearranging seats and speaking to the children in hushed tones. Soon the children look up at me expectantly and I can see it is time to begin.

‘Hello, my name is Reneé,’ I say, pressing my palm into my chest, ‘can you say ‘hello?’’

‘Hello,’ they respond, enjoying the word. ‘Yes, hello!”

‘We,’ I indicate with my arm moving in a large horizontal circle in front of me, ‘are going to do some drawing together. I will give you some paper,’ I hold up a blank sheet, ‘and some crayons.’ I wave a red crayon in the air suddenly deciding to abandon all ideas of painting. ‘We are going to draw with the crayons on the paper,’ I say, quickly sketching a red smiling face onto white.’

‘Yes!’ the children call, ‘okay, we can!’

The parents help give out the paper and we break the crayons into pieces. It must be the imminence of Easter, but I can’t help but thinking in this act we are something like Jesus with his loaves and fishes. Equally miraculously, in this process, the women and I find there are enough crayons to go around. The children begin drawing bright shapes, palm trees, peacocks and gardens on their pages, while the parents stand around quietly watching and settling any small disputes that arise. Seeing the children happy and occupied, I stand back from the scene for a moment and try to take it all in. Many of the older people sit beneath the shade of a dense tree, hoping to avoid the rising heat of the day. I notice one old man has withered legs and a pair crutches. Many of the Tamils have very dark skin, striking in shadow, and, unlike the Iranian and Afghan asylum seekers I am used to, their limbs are noticeably thin. Despite the number of people, the air is quiet. In the distance, the ocean glints in small aqua winks between the fleshy growth of beach cabbage.

Spread around us are the small, asbestos dwellings that used to house the quarantine station staff back when this site held elephants, giraffes and other exotic creatures, making their own slow migration to the mainland, bound for Perth Zoo. Now the buildings are worn with neglect, locked and disused, except for a handful of dormitories that have been converted for the arriving Sri Lankans and small houses for Immigration employees.

‘Hello, excuse me, Miss,’ I turn to see a Sri Lankan boy around ten or eleven at my side.

‘Hi,’ I reply. The boy is smiling widely, standing tall, with quick, intelligent eyes.

‘Excuse me Miss, my name is Zaahir. The guard told me you are a teacher. Miss, are you a teacher?’

‘Yes,’ I say,’ I teach art at the school here.’

‘Have you taught in other places in Australia?’ Zaahir asks in immaculate English.

‘Yes,’ I respond, ‘at lots of different schools.’

‘Oh, good,’ he says, his eyes lighting up even further, ‘because I am looking forward to going to school in Australia. I want to be a pilot. I just wanted to know if there were any schools that you could recommend, good schools that would help me to become a pilot.’ I laugh, taken aback and impressed by his wilfulness and spirit.

‘Don’t worry,’ I say, ‘most of the schools are good in Australia. Whichever school you go to, if you study hard, you will get to be a pilot.’ Zaahir beams excitedly back at me.

‘Thank you, Miss!’ he says confidently, running off happily to join the soccer game. As I watch him laugh with his friends, I feel a wave of sadness wash over me. I know from here the Tamil people will be transferred to Christmas Island. In the detention centre there, the accommodation has become overcrowded. The government does not seem to be able to keep up with the sudden increase in the number of arrivals from Sri Lanka. As a result, and perhaps due to pressures in the diplomatic relationship between Australia and Sri Lanka that insists on Australia agreeing the civil war in Sri Lanka is over, Australia had begun to ‘fast-track’ the Tamils back to their home country. This means the due process of making a claim is glossed over: many Tamils are not even given an interpreter, not necessarily told their rights, and instead are quickly assessed. More often than not they are put on a plane and returned to their perpetrators.[27] It has become well documented that many Tamils who fled Sri Lanka by boat have been imprisoned and tortured on their return.

One child comes up to me and shows me a beautiful drawing of a home with steps and a palm tree.

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[27] The Asylum Seeker Resource Centre (ASRC) states that in 2013, the Coalition began '…to implement a 48-hour turnaround for all people seeking asylum that arrive by boat. The aim is the transfer of asylum seekers to regional processing centres in Nauru or Manus Island within 48 hours…The policy is part of Operation Sovereign Borders and is based on a similar model in the UK…such a practice does not provide for any legal assistance or proper evaluation of asylum claims due to the time and pressure constraints.’

'Is this your home?' I ask.

'Yes, in Sri Lanka,' she responds

'It is a beautiful drawing.'

'It is for you.'

'This is for you too!' the boy behind her calls before I can respond, handing me his picture of a large, green dragon.

'Mine too!' adds another, then suddenly I am handed a paper after paper of brightly coloured sketches. I thank them, trying to acknowledge each one.

As the remaining children begin to finish, I distribute puppets and toys, which a small group of the older children start to draw. Some of the boys get up and begin a game of cricket. Several of the mothers and I watch, standing next to each other in silence. We had been catching each other's eye from time to time as the children were drawing and now most the younger children have finished the activity, we can relax as they run off to play. I am grateful for the women's help, for the gentle way they settled the children as they worked.

One of the mothers stands close to my left shoulder, and I realise we must be about the same age. I turn tentatively toward her, and she smiles briefly back at me, then we look back at the remaining children. I wonder if she speaks any English.

'Hi, I am Reneé,' I try. The woman turns to me.

'I, Jahanara.' Jahanara looks thin and worn. She is wearing a bright-red, floral, cotton dress. Jahanara does not smile or frown but stands upright. Her eyes have a striking intensity.

'Thank you,' she says, gesturing to the children.

'No problem,' I respond and immediately worry that this phrase would be difficult to interpret. We stand together in silence for a while, neither moving away. 'Were you frightened on the boat?' I ask suddenly, then at once regret my directness, look down. But Jahanara turns toward me, nodding once, slowly, her eyes fully focused on mine.

'Fifteen days, two days no…' Jahanara shows me an action, cup to mouth. I nod.

‘Two days, you had no water.’ Jahanara gestures with her hand to the children at the tables, takes her finger, trailing tears from eye to cheek, waits. ‘You had no water, the children were crying.’

‘Yes.’ Jahanara is calm, contained, she watches my face.

The world grows silent, distils, colours glow warmly on the periphery of my vision. When I move my body, it is like pushing through liquid glass, the day falls silent. Slowly I turn my whole self toward her, pulling from something deep inside, and she waits, she waits for me, the world paused. In that moment I cannot see anyone else: the old people, the children, the Immigration workers, the ocean, the cricket game. All other detail is simply erased. With all the will I can muster, I try to find the language to speak truthfully as one woman to another.

‘As a mum,’ I show *us* (hand to her, hand to me), ‘when your children are sad,’ my finger tracing eye to cheek, ‘it is so hard.’ I place my hand on heart, my expression pained, turn my face fully toward her own. Her eyes look deep into mine. Strong eyes, sharp eyes, fierce with the love of a mother. I stay with those eyes, take the weight of them. I simply stand and hold her gaze. She does not flinch, does not look away. We hold the silence together.

21

South Island

(Pulu Atas)

After my ride to the airstrip, I return to my accommodation. I pack up my books and the notes I have started to make from the *Clunies-Ross Chronicle* and put them away. My interview with Johnny has raised more questions than answers, and I am trying to think through all Johnny has told me while I wait for Nek Su to return from his trip to Christmas Island.

I find my phone and begin to scroll down though my emails, checking there is nothing urgent that I need to respond to. My pulse suddenly quickens as I realise there in my Inbox is a message I had not expected to receive until my return to the mainland. In the subject line, I can see the title of my manuscript. My chest tightens. This is the moment, this is the publisher's response to the revised manuscript I had been working on with the publisher's editor, the same poems written about the islands which I had excitedly shared with Jo. I feel my body tense while I simultaneously try to push down the rush of elation that this could be my passport at getting my work into the world, to tell the stories from this very place that so need to be told. This second time around, the publisher's response has come in a matter of weeks, and I cannot tell if this is a good or bad sign. I try not to overthink it and quickly open the message and it takes a moment to let the content to sink in. The email is so considered, couched with such tactful restraint that I have to reread it a second time to understand it is a rejection. Despite hours of feedback and weeks of editing, the answer is a definite 'no.' The publisher has chosen not to run with my work.

Weeks ago, when I left Perth for the Indian Ocean Territories, I was so worried about this moment playing out during my return the islands, that the rejection of years of work on poems written on the Cocos (Keeling) Islands would floor my confidence and take away from my ability to carry out my current

research. I feel my eyes sting and a balloon of pain swells in my chest. But to my surprise, from somewhere deeper, something else kicks in and overrides my devastation, makes my body stand straight, makes my eyes blink back the tears, urging me to sharpen and focus. I think of the turn back boats I discovered on my last days on Christmas Island, I think of all the people I met in my three years out here and the way their stories stay in my body, I consider all the faces and memories returning to me now, so many stories that remain untold. This is not about me. I realise I can't afford to be shattered, this is not a time to be undone. For all I know I may even have cancer, so the time to rise above is now.

I turn my attention back to my phone, begin to search my emails, I know I can find what I want in my records somewhere. I scroll back to December 2015 and then there it is, the email from the director of another publishing company that shortlisted my manuscript for an award the previous year. At the top of the email is the director's email address. I find my laptop, thinking I better do this properly, and send the director my concise request. I tell her my manuscript has been refined by my work with their competitor's editor and is looking better that when it was shortlisted for the publishing house's award. I didn't want to waste the director's time or mine, would she be interested in publishing my work? I ask, should I send my revised manuscript though? The response I get is immediate, the director tells me she is in Sydney. Send it directly to me as an attachment, she writes, her answer a resounding *yes!*

After the highs and lows of my exchanges with publishers, I am emotionally exhausted. Even though I am buoyed by the interest of a second publisher, I know I am just at the beginning, there are no guarantees. I know the publishing company and I will need to start the process of reviewing the manuscript all over again. I feel at a bit of a loss in my small room. The trade winds are blowing a gale again, and new guests have arrived in the room next to mine, which causes me to feel restless and slightly claustrophobic. I walk outside trying to work out what to do, when I see Trish running down the road toward me.

'Oh great, you're here!' she says, catching her breath. 'I've just decided to take some leave. Do you want to go to South Island for a couple of days? Could you be ready in an hour?'

As I step out of Trish's 4WD at the south end of West Island and start to cart the tents into the boat, the full force of the trade winds hits me. The water has been whipped into an aqua haze and everything without weight has become airborne. Trish reverses the boat trailer into the liquid colour, all around us the palms have become manic, clapping and flicking their fronds in a frenzied cacophony. Once the boat is immersed, Tony winds the trailer's cable, easing the boat down until the water takes its weight. Before he can bring the boat back to the shore to load, Trish's arms are piled with kids and bags, waiting in the shallows. Quickly we fill the tinnie with our few possessions, Trish tucking the young boys with the expert efficiency under canvas tarps. Tony waves with his characteristic broad grin as he drives away, back to the bakery, disappearing into lush greenery.

As we begin to plane across the lagoon, the sea spray, in what I experience as something akin to a personal attack, violently soaks my hair. Trish's children huddle further beneath the tarp in the tinnie's hull as the water cascades around their small bodies, but they don't look worried or complain. The ocean is frenzied, foaming, mad! I look toward Trish at the stern of the boat, wondering if she is thinking of turning back, but she is a picture of confidence, senses sharp, highly present, her body awake and tuned to the lagoon. Her straight back and narrowed eyes remind me I am with a woman who knows the water, who lives with sea, her manner both practical and practised. There is nothing to fear, the water in this part of the lagoon is just over a metre deep even at high tide, I let go and enjoy the wild ride.

Shortly after we arrive on South Island, Trish's friends follow, the window of high tide that makes movement between islands by boat possible (at times only just) is brief. This marginal, salty inundation will soon start to recede, leaving the thinnest veil of water over clusters of coral, interspersed with a sea floor drying to desert, a rippled landscape of blinding, white sand. Once we arrive, it is all hands on deck, putting up tents, unpacking supplies, laying out bedding beneath the

coconuts—though we know, despite our will for shade, to be careful not to place our bodies directly beneath the heavy fruit. The sun has begun to ease itself toward the water, behind the tiny islands of Pulu Blanche and Pulu Klapa Satu, disappearing quietly into cloud.

The ocean has already begun to make its rapid retreat, so by the time I have finished readying my sleeping spot, I look up to see the boats are now marooned on the shore, rendering them as strange installations on wide swathes of white. Trish's friends have two older children, and the small gang acquire head torches, roaming amongst purple hermit crabs the size of small fists as they search for coconut husks to place on the fire. Once lit, though we don't need its warmth, the light draws us in and we sit, resting after the hustled process of arriving, boats slowly coming out of shadow, silver bodies gently shining in the light of the rising moon.

The families head to bed early, and as I hear their canvas-muted conversations give way to sleep, I wander out onto the now vast expanse of glowing sand. The wind has stilled and an almost-silence, a new calm, settles over the water, between the trees. Alone—I lift my face, my hands to the pale, night light, turning my body in all that air. The shallow water whispers back. I barely feel real, toes digging into dampness in this liminal, watery moonscape, this in-between place that disappears darkly, seamlessly into sea. I am on an abandoned film set, light directional, cinematic, glancing off the gloss of coconut fronds, the trees' long bodies swallowed by shadow. An army of horn-eyed eel are stationed in position, standing on their own silhouettes across the newly birthed land. In all this absence, all this presence, I breathe. I breathe and become air, breathe and become silence, exhaling, losing the sure boundary of this thing called skin.

The next day we wake with the sun. We are becoming tidal, living finely tuned to the long, liquid breaths of the lagoon. The morning has painted itself in gentle pastels, colour resting on fat clouds stacked over the islands in soft towers. Where late last night thin trickles of water ran silently over sand, at dawn the channel between islands is a swift rush of crystal-clear sea. I sink into the deep surprise of cool water, feel the salt close over my head, zip-locked into the

membrane of this place. My cells sing to the water, *I am here, I am here*, *do you remember? Do you know my name?*

As the sun rises higher in the sky, we become happily trapped, marooned as the ocean once again retreats from the lagoon. White terns and dark noddies wheel in the sun while the water retracts to a briny veneer. In the glassy shallows, fish hide behind small moons of coral as the sea leaves steadily, swiftly, departing in a long, liquid sigh. Around me, tanned children run around saturated in light, inhabiting their idyllic lives. Palms pile into forts, coconuts are cracked for a late breakfast, little feet race between crabs carting their small, spiral caravans. I wander away from the camp, ready for a little space, out toward the southern point of the island. As I walk, I stop to read the broken lines from others' lives washed up on the shore: a white prayer hat, a school child's cap with a map of Indonesia printed under the spread of an eagle's wings. Two backpacks empty but for their cargo of sand.

Now that the sun is high, the wind once again becomes ruthless, relentless, bears down on a flat and sandy space robbed of resistance. The Cocos Malay call South Island Pulu Atas, top, or windward isle, and as the trade winds blast every last trace of moisture from my face, I can certainly see why. I battle it out for some time on the shore until I see the rise of lush undergrowth further inland and relent, retreating into young palms under the wide arms of figs. Out of the wind, the *wheet*, *wheet* of white terns catches in the canopy, their tiny, bright eyes watching the fact of me stepping below. I arrive in a small bay whose deep shape keeps the wind at arm's length. Here the figs stretch out, casting thick shade over glassed pools of water. Under their ageing limbs, sand and light are soft, the low ceiling of foliage holding a moist hush. So quiet. On the shore, brightly coloured rope washed off from boats has caught in the trees' wide, weathered roots, creating perfect ladders for a montage of crabs to climb. They look at me, surprised, from stalked eyes held high.

The earth, Rachel Carson tells us, once had enormous tides surging hundreds of metres. The waters would rise, flooding valleys and lowlands, climbing hills, only to tumble back in huge flows to where it had begun. As the earth evolved, the moon slowly moved away from us, a pale child slowly but surely leaving home. Its pull is

subtle now, expressed in increments kind to life, kind enough to let a purple crab carry her sacred cargo of eggs; you can almost feel the weight, the effort it takes to hide hundreds of small, dark pearls under her low-riding body.

I step once more into sun, walking past the southern-most point of the island, leaving the shelter of the lagoon behind for a view of the atoll's outer reef. Lines of motion that have pulsed for miles through the liquid arc of the earth reach their foamy crescendo here—waves roar, curling and crashing into layers of weathered rock. A turtle eyes me as it breathes between sets, its brown body a splayed silhouette in the lit wall of waves. Stepping onto the reef, I find the prow of a wooden boat, the ominous 'V' of the broken vessel heightening the drama of the swell. Along the back of the island, flotsam and driftwood pile for miles. The multiple ledges created by hundreds of washed up logs catch washing baskets, children's toys, toothbrushes, thick arms of rope and piles and piles of bright thongs. A grey reef egret's stance tells me she would like me to believe she is not there as she attempts to angle herself into invisibility. Red hermit crabs scuttle amongst the debris; five take shelter under a discarded high heel.

The days pass slowly on South Island. The world is pared back to light and dark, heat and shade and the out-breath, the in-breath of the sea. On the second evening, during the window of high tide, Trish heads back to the mainland to pick up Tony after his shift at the bakery. He arrives with warm buns, a lime tart and a fresh catch of fish. Our meal feels decadent amidst the sparse conditions of camping. In the light of the fire, watching their faces as they laugh together, I am filled with so much love for this small family. After being together again, it seems improbable that it is only a matter of days before my old friends disappear from my life once more. All night I lie in my tent beneath crisp stars listening to shoals of fish leap from the dark water, imagining the glistening arc of hundreds of tiny silver bodies in moonlight, the sleek shadow of a shark in their wake.

Just after dawn, I emerge from my tent to a perfect morning. The wind has dropped and the lagoon is glassy, reflecting voluptuous clouds with perfect symmetry. This is how I remember the atoll, inverted, continually reflected, water unrippled and brimming with life. The crystal quality of the light. I stand, cleaning

my teeth, feet in the shallows. Fish nibble at my toes. But there is no time to reminisce. The window to leave at high tide is brief, it is time to be on our way.

22

North Keeling

(Pulu Keeling)

While on South Island, Trish and I organised a time on Monday for me to interview her. I want to find out her perspectives on Cocos life as a long-term West Island resident, but in particular how her experiences as a park ranger have influenced her impressions of this fluid and changeable island-scape. When we meet, Trish has just returned from a trip from North Keeling, an uninhabited atoll twenty-five kilometres north of the Cocos (Keeling) Islands' main atoll.

I arrive at Trish's place just after four, in the brief space between when Trish finishes work and the time for baths and showers and preparing food for her large family begins. We sit on the bed in one of the boys' bedrooms so we are able to shut a door, while Tony entertains the four boys in the lounge.

'How was North Keeling?' I ask, smiling, supressing my intense jealousy that Trish's work frequently takes her to a wild space few people in the world ever get to see.

Named after Captain William Keeling, who is recorded as having sighted the atoll in 1609, North Keeling is the remotest of the remote when it comes to islands. The Cocos (Keeling) Islands are already part of Australia's most isolated territory, yet this tiny C-shaped ring yet another twenty-five kilometres from islands' main atoll formation, is that one step more removed again. Accessible only in the company of Parks Australia officers, and without so much as a jetty on which to land, North Keeling, though small, is breathtakingly abundant with life.

Of Pulu Keeling National Park's twenty-four bird species, eight are listed as being of special conservation significance, and fourteen are listed for special protection under the Japan–Australia, China–Australia and the Republic of Korea–Australia Migratory Birds Agreements, including the red-footed booby that has an estimated population of around thirty thousand breeding pairs. North Keeling is also home to greater and lesser frigatebirds, the endemic Cocos buff-

banded rail and the exquisite red-tailed tropic bird, (or silver bosunbird, whose elaborate breeding displays I so enjoyed on Christmas Island). Green turtles and the critically endangered hawksbill turtle also nest on the island's shores. The Cocos (Keeling) Islands, more broadly, hold significant historical and scientific value as they are the only coral atoll that Charles Darwin visited, playing a key role in the evolution of Darwin's theory of coral reef development. North Keeling gives us clues as to what the larger atoll must have looked like when Darwin visited in April 1836, and serves as important seed stock and gene pool for rare species now absent or threatened on the more populous areas of the Cocos (Keeling) Islands.

After 1944, in the brief period when the Clunies-Rosses gave way to British rule, the Cocos Malay accessed North Keeling frequently for hunting, bringing down thousands of the naturally friendly and curious birds, presumably for barter with the influx of soldiers during World War Two. In the 1970s and 1980s, increasing access to the island as well as new technologies in the design of both boats and guns, meant that the population of birds on the atoll was becoming massively depleted, and the Australian National Parks and Wildlife Service (now Parks Australia), intervened. In July 1986, a seabird hunting moratorium was introduced. Since the moratorium, the birds have thrived on the small atoll, their feathery bodies once again filling the sky, making North Keeling the internationally unique and ecologically vital rookery that it is today.

Trish and the other Parks officers make regular trips out to North Keeling to collect data, check on the wildlife and maintain the small amount of infrastructure on the remote site. Trish tells me that these visits always make her feel incredibly humble, keep her in her place, especially as she takes the comparatively small vessel, the RJ Hawke, over an area of impossibly deep and open ocean.

'You go up to North Keeling and you feel really small, really insignificant because it really belongs to the wildlife out there. It was a big demon for me, the ocean. Coming from being a ranger in Kakadu, I thought I was pretty invincible, and when I applied for this job I thought one of the only things I can't really do is drive a boat in the open ocean, and that is what I am going to have to do. It really was about confronting demons for me, and that was a big demon: facing a wild and wide-open sea.'

I think of Trish on the dinghy in the howling trade winds on our way to South Island. It is hard to imagine she had not always felt so sure, that her confidence was a life-skill, a courage, she had to grow.

'You know, North Keeling also makes me glad that there are places that are not managed just for people,' Trish continues. 'Coming from Kakadu, which is rich in diversity and has threatened species and this suite of habitats, then it brings in all of these tourists that come to visit and you have to build infrastructure for humans. You get people walking through rare and sacred sites, and you can't help but see that the park is clearly managed for tourists. Whereas on North Keeling, there is none of that: there is no jetty, there is no anything, there is nothing there. So it is nice that there are a few places left in Australia that are managed for conservation rather than the enjoyment of humans. It is such a wild place, it's just like something out of this world. Where we camp on North Keeling is about twenty metres from the beach, the waves are so ridiculously loud that you can't really have a conversation. You feel pretty vulnerable when you are staying there, at the mercy of the big, unpredictable ocean.'

Trish tells me it makes her really understand a little of what it must be like for the asylum seekers who make their dangerous boat trips over the Indian Ocean from Sri Lanka to Australia, such as the groups that made landfall on North Keeling itself.

'Tell me about that again,' I say. 'I remember seeing the plumes of smoke rising from the signal fires on North Keeling when Ash and I were sailing on the lagoon. What happened when you got there, after the Navy had arrived and taken the asylum seekers away?'

'That was in 2012,' Trish says, 'when we had that influx of asylum seeker boats on Cocos, and a group of about thirty people come ashore on North Keeling. I remember reports in the media said that there was about ten days before the signal fire was picked up on Home Island. We have some equipment up there and little shelters where we stay, and the asylum seekers were using some of our camping gear and food supplies just to stay alive. I was quite grateful that we had those resources up there because I would not like to think what might have happened to the people otherwise.'

Trish tells me that when she and the other Parks' officers went back to assess the site and check whether there had been any introduction of invasive species from the asylum seeker's boat, they found traces the brief visitors had left behind. Amongst those traces were messages written by the asylum seekers on the bins and huts, such as 'Australia please take us', 'We are 32 people', 'Sorry we take your things' and 'Sorry Australia'. I love this story, the unexpected interface that occurred between two very different groups of people, but I am also amazed that asylum seekers under such incredible duress and owning so little, would think to apologise for the small liberties they were forced to take.

'For me, that moment of discovering the messages, became a really personal and emotional side of my job that I never thought I would come across,' Trish says, 'and it was important for me to try and communicate that experience to the people who lived here. So we put a little article in the local newsletter not trying to colour it either way, just to say they had come ashore and used our things and were very grateful. There messages are still there and it is actually part of the interpretive tour that I do now, so every time I take Border Force people or a school group up there, I always show them the notices, I show them because it is part of our history.'

Trish goes on to tell me about another boat of asylum seekers that year that came ashore on North Keeling that had seventy people on board.

'Their boat actually sank' she says, 'so they came ashore with nothing and we picked them up three days after they got there, which is good, because I don't know how long the coconuts and whatever else they could find would have sustained them. Anyway, they had made little camps up and down the beach and so while I was on North Keeling the last few days, I was having to go through the tents and sort them out. I was picking them all up and that's when I thought, "Oh, this is a heavy tent." I knew it was one of the Sri Lankan tents because they tried to hang them up with anything they could find, and they had used pink flagging tape to try and attach them to the trees. I looked inside and there was something heavy, it was hanging from the roof of the tent. I t was a little deity or something, some religious figure. Again, it just felt very personal.

When we left we had to burn just about everything as we did not know what had been contaminated. And some of the back packs had just a toothbrush

and a tube of toothpaste and a little deity and I just found it so confronting. Coming into contact with asylum seekers was just another side of park management that I really never had any idea would be part of my work, so I felt really privileged that I had been able to be part of that and understand the issue from another side, rather than read about it in the media. It was firsthand and I felt really fortunate to be able to share that story for what it was. It was so unexpected, but it was very real.'

'Mum, have you seen my boardies?' Trish's son, Jack, asks, appearing in the doorway. Trish and I smile ruefully at each other, knowing that, given Trish's large family, our small window of time for talking may soon come to a close.

'No Jack, ask Dad, but I will be with you in a few minutes,' Trish answers.

'Okay,' says Jack, 'but I need then for school tomorrow, we are going to South End and Dad doesn't know where they are.'

'Thanks, Jack, I'll help you after Reneé and I have finished. Can you close the door please?' Trish asks patiently, and Jack leaves, closing the door quietly behind him.

'Ah, it's hard to believe you are going in a few days,' Trish says. 'We have just got used to having you around again.'

'I know,' I say, 'I feel like when I get back home, I will be able to still wander over to see if you guys want to go camping or come around for dinner.'

'You know what one of the nicest things was about this trip?' Trish asks rhetorically, going back to our former conversation. 'It was getting to take a couple of Home Islanders with us to talk about some of the issues we have up there. It was nice to be able to say, actually this is the reason it is locked up, this is the reason for the legislation, because look at it, if you guys just came here whenever you wanted, it would look like Home Island does, there simply would not be any birds. Getting the Home Islanders to be able to see that was pretty good. I think it was an awakening for them, actually. They said, 'Oh this is what you do up here, yeah right, I think I get it,' and they were looking at what Parks does in a different way. They obviously have a history of taking birds for food, and then when the federal legislation came in in 2000, they were clearly not allowed to do that anymore and they still have that decision hanging over their heads. But talking to these fellas the

last two days, they could see why we wanted to keep it like this, it is pretty special, you know?'

'And what about you personally, Trish, you've really sunk your roots here, do you think you will always live on the Cocos Islands?' I ask.

'No, I don't think I will always live here,' she answers. Trish tells me that probably one of the biggest challenges for her is the 'isolation factor', the high cost of airfares making visiting the atoll prohibitive for many people, including family and close friends.

'That we have lost touch with a lot of very close family and friends over the last seven years has been really difficult. Every time I have people who are actually able to afford to visit and they leave, I just think, 'I don't know why I live so far from everybody.' So the geographical location is probably one of the hardest things. None of your family seeing your kids grow up. Just cutting yourself off from people you should be surrounded by, parents and siblings and grandparents, that sort of thing. Wanting people who really know you, who share your DNA.'

'Mum, Dad wants to know if you want lasagne or fish for tea,' Henry calls, opening the door a fraction. Trish and I look at each other and laugh.

'Looks like you're off the hook,' I say, and I turn my recorder off. Henry looks pleased with himself as we walk out into the bustle of games and half-chopped vegetables. Tony is on the phone and Tiago is making a beeline for the knife he can see by the chopping board. Henry grabs the knife and turns to us, one eyebrow raised, and we all laugh. I turn to Trish to thank her and kiss her goodbye. By the time I have reached the bottom steps of the verandah, I can hear someone is crying, see Tony has put down the phone and is quickly consoling, while Jack calls from the back of the house that he still hasn't found his board shorts.

23

Home Island

(Pulu Selma)

It is just after sunrise when I get off the bus at Rumah Baru to catch the ferry across the lagoon on Tuesday morning. The strange sense of no-time returns as other familiar faces congregate at the end of the jetty, also heading to Home Island for work. The ferry service used to run from the northernmost end of West Island, but the old wooden jetty's exposure to incoming swells sweeping across the Indian Ocean caused the structure to become repeatedly damaged during storms. So a decision was made to locate the new jetty further north within the shelter of the lagoon, and an impressive catamaran was bought to replace the small, old ferry to move islanders more efficiently across the atoll. The stretch of lagoon where the large jetty at Rumah Baru was subsequently constructed is an important feeding ground for green turtles, who graze on the bay's seagrass beds. The area has been significantly affected by the construction of the new jetty as well as the turbulence created by the more powerful engine of the new catamaran, turning the beach's clear waters a cloudy green. The sand now suspended in the sea water limits the sunlight reaching the seagrass beds, threatening the green turtle's vital source of food. Yet as I chat, I see their small heads repeatedly come up for air, the dark, almond shape of their watching eyes, until the ferry arrives and they disappear like a jack-in-a-box into the murky water.

From the ferry, more familiar faces disembark, the women a stream of bright colour in their ankle-length baju kurungs (or literally, 'enclosed dresses'), as Home Islanders arrive to work or visit West Island.

'Pagi, Mak,' the islanders call, smiling briefly, moving quickly to make it to the bus that will take them to the small hub at the centre of West Island. Once on the ferry, I make my way to the top deck of the boat, looking down to where the turbines stir up more white sand. Turtles like large oblong platters dive down and

away from the boat, then slowly come up again, raising their curious heads as the ferry speeds away. As we head out into the lagoon the waters clear once more and I lean out over the metal railing to watch the intricate formations in the undulating terrain of coral that slip by. Two flying fish leap from the boat's wake, blue wings wide in morning light.

As we head toward the centre of the lagoon, the great 'U' of the atoll wraps around me, a flat map where I am not looking down, but across a large-scale work of cartography. I feel like I could lower a great finger from the sky and point, leave an arrow saying, 'I was here', as the large arc of Pulu Atas, South Island, and its many smaller siblings is revealed in hues of washed-out greys and blues. At the same time, Direction Island, or Pulu Tikus, comes into view to the north, defined from this angle by the thick coat of trees that runs the long, thin line of its spine. Soon after, the tiny speck of Pulu Beras, or Rice Island, becomes visible. Mainly referred to now as Prison Island, this lonely clump of trees clinging to a tiny dune at the edge of the outer reef is tenuous in the extreme. During the time of the settlement of the Cocos (Keeling) Islands, Pulu Beras was much more substantial; so substantial, in fact, that Alexander Hare (the atoll's original coloniser) moved his household here in order to contain and control not only his supplies of rice, but his 'family' of around twelve women and thirty children. The women and children, purported by the Clunies-Ross and others to have been used by Hare for prostitution, were confined to the first floor of Hare's dwelling, giving birth to the tiny island's contemporary name.

Soon Home Island comes into view, unfolding as a line of silhouettes as the ferry slows. As the ferry glides into the jetty, the black shapes of palms and houses define themselves more sharply as we emerge though a thin screen of haze. At the dock, I look down on a neat line of motorbikes, quad bikes and golf carts parked in front of the jetty's railing. Home Island, being too small and too densely populated to allow for individual car ownership, relies on these vehicles as the island's main forms of transport. This morning the bikes and buggies are parked so perfectly parallel and evenly spaced from one another they look like they are part of a display. I descend down the stairs as the ferry is tied to the pier, the smell of diesel thick in the air, stepping out into sunlight on the jetty. As I wander down the streets

of the kampong, islanders rake leaves into piles as thin plumes of smoke rise slowly in the tropical air. All along the swept, paved streets, my nostrils fill with the scent of burning foliage. Images of my family's brief time of living in Indonesia flash into my mind, and I almost have to remind myself that I am not in Asia, but rather, on the very fringe of Australia, in a tiny village that seems like a barely visible bridge between two seemingly disparate worlds.

As I reach the edge of the kampong, I can make the out cluster of yellow and blue buildings surrounded by ovals and palm trees that form Home Island's primary school campus. I wander into the undercover area at the school's centre to find the year three to six classroom where I am about to teach.

As I unpack my things, spurred by the stimulus of returning to Home Island, I try to cast my mind back, attempt to remember how the relationship between the Clunies-Rosses and the Cocos Malay was first communicated to me as a new arrival in 2012, and find I am left with a sense of overwhelming silence around the atoll's history. The spaces and omissions a difficult thing to read, but thinking things through once more, I realise that the silence was not just a result of the cultural diplomacy of the Cocos Malay. There was also a strong sense on West Island that it was best to let complex, sleeping dogs lie, especially when members of the former family dynasty still lived amongst you. I also distinctly remember overt critics of the Clunies-Rosses (who no longer lived on the atoll) being scathingly attacked by several long-standing members of the white community, including Johnny himself. If discussed at all, on West Island, the Clunies-Rosses were conveyed as imperfect, but progressive for the time, with the Clunies-Ross family cast as caring colonialists who had the Cocos Malays' best interests at heart.

When working on Home Island, it was fascinating hearing the Cocos Malay education assistants teaching the students about their own cultural traditions, and I remember going back home on the ferry to West Island smeared in turmeric paste after a lesson looking at traditional practices in local Cocos Malay weddings. On the islands' campuses, the legacy of the feudal regime appeared to be skirted around, and I wondered what it was like for the Cocos Malay to be working alongside the wife of the seventh-generation member of the Clunies-Ross family, a teacher

employed at the Home Island school, what this meant for the Cocos Malay's ability to honestly share their own history.

'Jalan, jalan!'

My thoughts are interrupted by the staccato slap of feet on concrete and the sound of the education assistant's call for the students to walk as they reach the classroom's verandah, but the children ignore her instruction as they run happily back to class after the end of daily fitness. I try to make out their conversations as I wait inside, enjoying the sounds of the familiar language I have come to love breezing lightly in through the louvered windows. I take out a Mary Oliver poem, bookmark the page, spread out my lesson plan as the children come laughing and chatting through the door.

Leaving the school, I am once again buoyed by the students' openness to me as well as the collaborative process of writing poetry. Despite the diverse range of ages in the class, the young students have surprised me with the originality of their work and the freshness of their images: blue-shine in the fins of trevally, glow of sandbags in tropical sun, scent of burning leaves they too have noted and savoured as they run along pale, paved roads on the way to school. I know it is another three and half hours to the return ferry, and I try and figure out what I could do in the time I have between now and then. I reach into my bag and pull out my hat to ward off the sun now high in the sky, walk across the volleyball field and turn back into the kampong, walking between stands of banana plants glowing greenly from the gardens of row upon row of fibro houses. The sound of laughter rises up from across the road and I glimpse a line of trestle tables in a concrete yard covered with brightly coloured food. The smell of sugar and spices wafts toward me and I wonder what the family in this home are celebrating.

Turning right, I come across a short street almost too tidy to be true. Bright, floral curtains hang inside a window with red sill; an immaculate, blue retro motorbike leans against the wall by an open front door. I get out my camera, wondering at the ethics of photographing other people's homes without their consent, when I hear the sound of a golf cart coming toward me. I quickly put my camera back in my bag and try to look nonchalant, feeling white and conspicuous,

standing randomly in the middle of an empty road. The bright green buggy slows down and I look up, and much to my surprise I realise the driver is Nek Su.

I wave and Nek Su frowns at me curiously, so I take off my hat and I see his brow unfurrow, full lips stretching into a broad smile.

'Mak!'

'Nek!'

'It's you!' Nek exclaims, 'did you just walk past? I was sitting outside the house, did you see the one with the tables?'

'Yes, but I didn't see you, Nek, I didn't know you were back!' I reply. 'How funny! Nek, I was just thinking…I just wondered,' I begin, hoping this could be my window, but not wanting to put Nek Su on the spot, 'seeming you are here, would you have time for a cup of tea? Could I ask you and Jeannette a few of the questions we talked about?'

'What, now?' Nek asks.

'Sure. Or another time if that's better…'

Nek Su looks surprised, but then smiles and gestures toward the spare seat next to him and I jump in. Though clearly elderly, Nek Su's appearance is striking. Handsome and self-assured, body lean from his life of fishing, Nek's stature is upright and proud, eyes holding a compassionate and intelligent directness. He has the air of a leader, someone both wise and incredibly kind. I bounce beside him on the golf cart feeling grateful that his world has come into mine.

A few metres down the road, we pull into what must be his driveway. Under the shade of a large annexe is an extensive outdoor area paved with concrete and framed on all sides by fibro buildings. Parked at the back of the pad is a sizable white motorboat and two aluminium dinghies.

'These are my boats,' Nek tells me, not in the least bit trying to downplay his pride. His smile is so broad I can't help but mirror it, but not being a huge fan of motorboats myself, I am not quite sure what to say.

We head inside where I can see Jeannette is preparing food in the kitchen.

'Pagi, Mak!' I wave, and she turns to see us coming through the back sliding door.

‘Reneé!’ Jeannette exclaims, clearly surprised. She washes her hands, dries them on her apron and comes toward me. We kiss each other hello and walk back to the lounge to sit down. Nek Su and Jeannette’s house is defined by a long hall that extends from the front door, opening to several rooms either side and a wide, open-plan kitchen and living area where we are now standing. I can’t help but notice that their home is imbued with what strikes me as a female touch: walls painted a pale blue with blue patterned throws over couches, blue framed artworks on the walls. There is a softness, a warmth to the space that makes me feel at home, light pouring into the open living area through gauzy, lace-draped windows. On pine shelf that leans against the kitchen wall are framed photos of several young children that I guess must be Jeannette’s grandchildren, and I wonder what price she pays being here married to the man she loves, so far from her own children and the mainland she once called ‘home’.

‘Jeannette, I was wondering if you and Nek had time to just talk briefly with me now while I am on Home Island. I would love to hear both of your perspectives on your life here.’

‘Sure,’ Jeannette answers, ‘though there is a celebration this afternoon, but I am sure we can cover most things by the end of the morning.’ Jeannette puts on the kettle and we settle into our places on the couch. I dig around in my bag to check my recorder is still there and the pad with my questions.

There is a palpable tenderness between Nek and Jeannette as they sit next to each other on the couch. I can’t help but think they look like the most unlikely couple, Nek with his deeply coloured skin and full lips harking back to his Javanese heritage, and Jeannette, short and distinctively pale, suggesting an ancestry that is probably English or Scottish—yet seeing them together in their own home they make complete sense. In front of me are two intelligent and capable people who fell in love twenty-five years ago when Nek Su took Jeannette out on his boat to teach her how to fish.

‘Was she any good?’ I ask Nek.

‘Yes, because I taught her,’ Nek says, face deadpan, playfulness flashing across his deeply set eyes. Jeannette’s face, however, is lit with the memory. I laugh

warmly at her and she grins self-consciously, looks at the floor, a smile still spread wide across her face.

Nek tells me he was born on Cocos in 1942 and that his family are spread between Cocos, Katanning and Port Hedland in Western Australia. As we chat, he shares about the changes he has seen on the tiny atoll. As a man finely tuned to the tides and nuances of season, he is worried about the shifts he is observing in the weather. He tells me that even as late as 2000, he used to be able to read patterns in the behaviour of the wind, accurately predicting when there would be a spell of good weather. Now, he tells me, he cannot read what the weather is going to be like in the weeks ahead, cannot predict its pattern—everything seems to be changing.

Nek tells me that though there have always been fluctuations in both the weather and the atoll's shape, the changes are now much more dramatic and happening faster.

'South Island and West Island are quite different now. At that time on South Island we sail to Pulu Kecik, Pulu Bulan, Pulu Mariah and South End. That time we could sail from Pulu Kecik to South Island but now West Island, South End, it comes very close to Pulu Maria. You know the big cannon on Horsburgh Island?' he asks. 'Last time, we could not see that because of the land. Now it is on the water.'

I try to image the World War Two cannon being set well back behind a large expanse of sand. The last time I visited Pulu Luar (or Horsburgh, as it is known on West Island) salt water was swirling around the rusted weapon's concrete foundations, working steadily at its steel, eroding the re-enforced feet of this stark piece of military history threatening to pull it face first into the sea.

Nek goes on to tell me that while he does worry about all the sudden changes, the atoll belongs to Allah, it is up to Allah whether things change quickly or whether they will start to slow and stabilise.

I ask Nek how often he is out on the sea. He tells me sometimes three times a week, sometimes every day. Nek explains he and Jeannette make fairly regular trips to the mainland as Jeannette, semi-retired, now lives off nursing contract work. Even in Jurien Bay, a rural town on Western Australia's coast, after three or four weeks without his boat, Nek starts to feel imprisoned in that windy, mainland

town. When this happens, he imagines himself out on the water, visualises himself heading out into the lagoon, holds his memories of sitting in one of his quiver of boats surrounded by nothing but sea.

Nek goes on to tell me that when he was around ten years old there were still many people living on Home Island. I research later the population statistics for the number of people living on the Island in 1950. Records indicate around one thousand eight hundred people lived on Home Island, compared to approximately five hundred people today.

'That time if you go fishing in the early morning until the afternoon, you maybe just get ten or fifteen fish because there were too many people,' he tells me.

When Nek Su was around twelve, many people from Home Island were sent to Sabah in Borneo in an effort to de-populate the crowded atoll. After about ten years, the fish started to return to the lagoon and the atoll's population of turtles, once an important part of the Cocos Malay diet, also started to improve. Today there are so many turtles, Nek Su tells me he has to be careful driving his motorboat: the lagoon is so abundant with their large bodies, it is far too easy to accidentally run into these creatures that share the atoll's waters.

The first time I met Nek Su was in December 2013, just before my family and I left the Cocos (Keeling) Islands. As a going away present, Trish and Tony had bought us a voucher for a ride in a jukong, a small, wooden boat with no keel, originally one of the main forms of transport on the atoll. Nek Su was our skipper and also on board was a Cocos Malay friend's son, Azie, whom Nek was teaching to sail. Nek Su's reputation had preceded him, and I was so excited not just to ride in a jukong, but also to meet this legendary man I had heard so much about. The day was windy and Nek was quiet and focused as we headed off from Home Island. Trish and the boys sailed with Pak Yati alongside us. The two boats looked so beautiful with their white sails and varnished prows against the palm-lined beaches, it felt for a moment out in the middle of lagoon (away from the infrastructure of the atoll) like were travelling alongside the original Cocos Islanders, transported into another time.

Nek Su was brought up learning how to set up and work the jukong rigging from a young age. Education was sporadic on Home Island. Nek Su remembers

being taught Jawi (Arabic script that enabled the reading of the Koran) for a short time when he was around eight years old, after which he tells me he received no education at all. In the 1950s, Nek tells me jukongs were still the main form of transport on the Home Island and, as a capable and inquisitive twelve-year-old, Nek Su began to teach himself how to sail. Every week he would go out sailing alone, becoming more and more adept at his craft, his mind having the stimulus of the working of the boat, reading the water, its tides and the atoll's weather.

When I express my surprise at Nek's lack of education, he is silent for a moment, like he is turning something over in his mind.

'When I left Cocos in 1976, I have a friend who has passed away. He said the Cocos people cannot really tell their story because of no school. I worried about that.'

Nek's words trouble me. I had heard that the education provided to the Cocos Malay during the reign of the Clunies-Rosses was not to Australian standards, but I presumed it had, for the most part, existed. I consider I had largely believed the rhetoric on West Island that the life the family dynasty afforded the Cocos Malay was better than the islanders would have received in other parts of the world at that time. Perhaps this could be argued for the 1800s, but Nek is talking to me about recent history, about the 1950s. Australia accepted the Cocos (Keeling) Islands as a territory from the British in 1955, and though the islands were still under Clunies-Ross rule, the idea that an incredibly capable person like Nek Su was not able to receive even the most basic of educations in our country is both shocking and disturbing.

On my return to the mainland, I turn my attention to researching the history of education of the Cocos Malay people on Home Island. Of all the ironies, it is the *Clunies-Ross Chronicle* itself that provides the most damning evidence of the negligence of even the most recent incarnations of the paternal regime. The *Chronicle* repeatedly documents the way in which great lengths were taken to ensure a very high standard of education was maintained for the children in the Clunies-Ross family, by either sending them away to boarding schools in Europe, or through the provision of private tuition in the family home. In the 1940s, when fifteen-year-old John Cecil Clunies-Ross was studying 'all the science subjects:

maths, additional maths, chemistry and physics, plus English, one modern language, French, one classical language, Latin, and an arts subject, English literature' while attending Exeter Grammar School in Devon, a military administrator Lt-Col Jessamine was sent to the Cocos (Keeling) Islands. Jessamine's role was to oversee the running of the atoll, as the British Government briefly assumed control of the islands as a strategic outpost during the Second World War. While noting the pride the Cocos Malay people took in both their homes and dress, he also noted the glaring absence of education for the indigenous people of the atoll:

> The very sad point is the whole population is illiterate. There are approximately 800 children on the island with no school. If ever such a decision occurred as to transfer the population elsewhere, they would be easy prey to all the unscrupulous. What is to become of them?

Yet despite these observations, the *Clunies-Ross Chronicle* still seems to be attempting to portray the Clunies-Rosses as benevolent, paternal carers of the Cocos Malay. Christmas Island's District Officer, GW Webb, who was sent on an official visit to the islands in 1937, is quoted in the *Chronicle* as saying the Eastern Extension Telegraph Staff (who worked on nearby Direction Island) had 'nothing but the highest praise for [John Clunies-Ross's] kindness and methods of dealing with the islanders. His heart and soul are in the place, and he regards them as his own children.'

The Clunies-Ross's and Webb's shared paternalistic attitude toward the Cocos Malay is extended to the men's attitude toward education. Webb describes the lack of schooling as 'rather an advantage in such a community on the present lines.' This sentiment is echoed in the *Chronicle* in a special chapter on education by David Heath, a former teacher on the Cocos (Keeling) Islands in the 1970s. Heath, presumably under the direction of John Clunies-Ross who 'compiled' the *Chronicle*, writes: 'Traditionally education on Cocos was vocation orientated…This form of practical education suited the island's needs.'

To whose 'advantage' was the 'lack of schooling' for the Cocos Malay population that Webb describes? Whose 'needs' did the 'practical education' serve?

When back on the mainland after my visit to Cocos, I flick back through my transcript of my interview with Johnny Clunies-Ross. Toward the end of the interview, I ask Johnny if he wished his family did more to raise the standard of education for the Cocos Malay, which I believed at the time to be simply below par. Johnny responds by saying that his father did a lot of reading on the 'need to educate the masses.' He tells me that his father understood that if 'you educate your children, they will all leave home. The communities will die from the young people having a wider horizon…what you need is an agricultural, agrarian economy to soak everyone up.'

Johnny's statement would seem to suggest that the Clunies-Rosses knew exactly what they were doing when they withheld education from the Cocos Malay people. While ensuring their own family were empowered by some of the most elite forms of education available at the time, the Clunies-Rosses deprived almost all of the Cocos Malay even the most basic forms of literacy and numeracy. In this way, the Clunies-Ross dynasty maintained their hegemony, their exclusive power over a strategic workforce, who were conveniently out of sight of the international community.

However, occasional efforts were made by some members of the family's ruling patriarchs to introduce basic levels of education on Home Island. George Clunies-Ross educated a clerk with the aim of getting his employee to run a school on Home Island in 1891. Yet by 1898, for reasons that are unclear, this venture had failed, and no concerted efforts were made to improve the situation until more than half a century later. It was not until 1973 that a professional teacher (David Heath, author of the chapter on education in the *Clunies-Ross Chronicle*) was appointed from the mainland, but even then, Heath's role was overseen by John Clunies-Ross, education was non-compulsory and the achievements of the students were well below Australian minimum standards. Heath notes that even these early and very basic efforts at education on Home Island were instrumental in the Cocos Malay beginning to shift toward 'a less Clunies-Ross-reliant island governance.' It was not until 1980 that the Australian Government took on a direct role in the administration of education on the Cocos (Keeling) Islands as well as enacting an ordinance that made education on the island compulsory, a move the *Chronicle*

describes as ‘unnecessary’. Sitting in Nek Su and Jeannette’s lounge room on Home Island, I am only just beginning to grasp the extent of the inequitable conditions on Home Island. It is hard to believe that I lived in such a small community for two years and yet knew so little about the atoll’s recent history.

I turn to Jeannette and ask her about her life in the Indian Ocean Territories, how she found herself living in Australia’s only Muslim-majority island on land two metres above the sea, almost exactly halfway between Australia and Sri Lanka. Jeannette tells me she first lived on the Cocos Islands as a nurse in 1980. She met her ex-husband, who was a government administrator at the time, on the atoll, and the couple returned to Perth to have a family. Jeannette then lived on Christmas Island with her young family from 1984 to 1987. Jeannette experienced Christmas Island as very isolating as she found herself stuck at home with young children, trying to form networks with a transient white population that would repeatedly come and go. After three years, Jeannette’s husband’s contract on Christmas Island ended and they returned to Perth.

When back in Perth, Jeannette continued her nursing studies, but also took on some units in Indonesian as she dreamed of returning to Cocos (Indonesian and Cocos Malay being very similar languages). Jeannette’s language skills helped her secure a job on the atoll in 1991, where she was based on Home Island as a registered nurse.

‘I loved living with the Cocos Malay community,’ Jeannette tells me, ‘I felt right at home there, I just loved it. I enjoy that sort of healthcare, mainly community health nursing. It involves a lot of health promotion and that sort of thing. We made cooking books with Nek Dila and we did cooking classes and I took exercise classes. It was such a big change because even in 1990, people didn’t have access to things like paracetamol or cough mixture. Those medications were at the health centre, and if people were sick they had to come into the centre in order to get their medication. In fact, when I was there in 1980, people who were on antibiotics had to come into the health care centre four times a day to get their medication.’

‘Why?’ I ask, ‘What was the logic?”

‘Because the attitude was that the Cocos Malay could not be trusted to take their own medication. There was no running water, no toilets…’

‘In 1980?’ I ask, feeling I must have misunderstood.

‘In 1980. There were no toilets or running water.’

‘So people would go the toilet in the lagoon?’ I venture, thinking, surely not…

‘Yes, in the lagoon.’ Jeannette laughs, ‘I remember walking along the front of the lagoon and waving to one of the health care workers, saying “Hi, Wak James!” because I didn’t realise what he was doing.’ The three of us begin to laugh, imagining the playing out of the scene. ‘He was having a poo in the lagoon of course, and I had no idea. Poor guy, there I was just standing in front of him waving!’

We laugh for some time at the image of Jeannette innocently confronting someone in such a private moment, when down the hall comes a slender woman in a black, floral baju kurung carrying a plate of food boasting an array of bright greens, whites and pinks. Nek introduces his daughter-in-law, who smiles and places the platter down in front of us: bright jelly cakes in rainbow colours, sticky rice wrapped in banana leaves and thick slices of what looks like vanilla cake. We thank her as she disappears, waving, back down the hall. I choose a parcel of sticky rice, telling Nek its texture looks a bit like squid. As I bite into it, thick palm sugar oozes into my mouth, its sweetness singing on my tongue.

Jeannette finishes her piece of vanilla cake, and then begins picking the small crumbs from her lap as she continues.

‘It’s funny, you know, how things come back to you. When I was driving in Perth recently, I remembered a fellow who was working at the quarantine station in the 1980s, who had helped bring in some cattle. He said to me, ‘Oh, they live such an idyllic life, the Cocos Malay want for nothing.’ But at the time people had hook worm, there were no toilets, like I said, and no running water. We used to test the water out of the wells and it almost pure E. coli, it was pure E. coli that the people were drinking. There was so much rheumatic fever because the people didn’t get proper health care, which then caused more illness as time went by. The Cocos Malay had allergies and they were so anaemic that people didn’t grow properly — the malnutrition affected people’s growth.’

I sit on the couch across from Nek Su and Jeannette trying to take in the information they are telling me. I trust Jeannette's observations as a medical practitioner, but I can also barely believe what I am hearing.

'The people from West Island weren't allowed to come to Home Island, only on very special occasions,' Jeannette continues

'Why?' I ask, my mind still reeling.

'Because it was a closed sort of town, a closed community. People from Home Island weren't allowed to go to West Island.'

'So the Government decided this?'

'No, the Clunies-Rosses,' Jeannette replies.

'That is why the Clunies-Rosses were stopped by the Australian Government in 1978,' Nek Su adds.

'It was that sort of transitory time,' Jeannette continues. 'I was based on West Island in 1980 and we used to go over, the doctor and the nurse and I used to go to Home Island twice a week.'

'So the Clunies-Rosses actively separated the communities?' I ask.

'Yes,' Jeannette replies.

Former Cocos Island resident and researcher Pauline Bunce writes: 'Up until the turn of the century, the inhabitants of Cocos rarely saw individuals from the outside world.' Bunce writes that in 1901, the Extension Telegraph Company (referred to by Webb) was established and a relay station was built on Direction Island. George Clunies-Ross was wary of the effect that the new arrivals may have on his tightly controlled community, so he instructed all contact to Home Island to be through the Clunies-Rosses home at Oceania House, while supervising all the visits the Cocos Malay made to Direction Island. The controlling tendency of the Clunies-Rosses continued though successive generations, limiting the Cocos Malay people's freedom of movement and communication. This included controlling Home Islander's access to Direction and West Islands, the breach of which meant risking fines and punishment through unpaid work, as well as ensuring that entry to Home Island by West Islanders and the outside world was allowed by invitation only.

In the early 1960s, the Clunies-Ross estate began doing contract work for the Commonwealth Government on West Island. A supervisor for the Department of Housing and Construction, Arthur Braund, satisfied with the work done by the Cocos Malay, encouraged John Clunies Ross to tender for Government contracts on West Island. John Clunies-Ross followed his advice and won some lucrative contracts on both West and Direction Islands.

One of these contract workers was Nek Su. Nek Su tells me he was contracted as 'a jack of all trades' for a company known as GHD.

'Oh, I can do everything,' Nek tells me, 'I can do the plumbing, I can do the welder, drive all the vehicles for the company, bulldozer, front-end loader, grader, all the vehicles I can drive, whatever they let me do I can do it. '

Nek Su quickly realised that his access to West Island was an opportunity to have a voice in the wider world. Sick of his low wages and the layers of injustice he experienced on Home Island, he repeatedly used his work in the offices of West Island to form networks and report the conditions under which the Cocos Malay were living to the Australian workers in the government and administrative offices on West Island.

Nek Su tells me that his wage of one hundred and fifty dollars was paid directly to the Clunies-Ross estate, and in turn the estate paid him ten and a half rupia a week. This amounted to about one dollar at the time, but the dollar was paid to him in the Clunies-Ross currency of plastic money (all other forms of currency were prohibited on Home Island), a currency he could only spend at the Clunies-Ross store.

'And this is why I am leaving Cocos,' Nek Su states matter-of-factly. I watch Nek's face, still holding its usual calm and openness, and wonder what this monumental decision must have been like for a man so intimately connected to the atoll. How must he have felt to be driven from a place he loved, to find himself stepping on a plane for the first time, then driving through a city, into a world of wide-open paddocks in the wheat and sheep town of Katanning in Western Australia's south?

Nek Su worked in Katanning for four years in the abattoir until someone discovered he was also a self-taught welder and offered him a job in Wagin. In the

time during which Nek forged a new life on the mainland, the Cocos (Keeling) Islands were never far from his mind, and his sense of homesickness for his island home never left him. Nek tells me that about one month into his time working in the abattoir, a senator came to Katanning to ask to meet with him. In the meeting the senator told Nek Su not to worry, that change was coming to Cocos and that he would soon be able to return home. Two years later, Nek Su was visited by two officials from Canberra. They personally informed Nek Su that he was safe to go back to Cocos, the Australian government had purchased the atoll, and that it was stories like those he had shared with the West Island officials during his time as a contractor that had helped this monumental change to come about. In 1980, Nek Su left Wagin and returned to the Cocos (Keeling) Islands.

Jeannette and Nek Su now run a Bed and Breakfast from their house on Home Island, where they receive guests from all over the world, including researchers such as linguists and musicologists researching Cocos Malay culture. They have several investment properties in Perth and, of course, a selection of boats with which to enjoy their tropical lifestyle. I consider what a remarkable journey it has been for them both, how much has changed since the 1980s, when Jeannette had first arrived on the atoll.

'Do you think you will always live here?' I ask. Nek Su and Jeannette chat as Jeannette translates the question. I sit for a moment trying to take in something of what I have heard.

'I think so,' Nek Su answers. 'I will stick to Cocos forever. I was born on Cocos, that is why I love Cocos. I like teaching the younger boys, their culture at the school, teaching jukong rigging, sailing and Malay dancing. I am still teaching the younger boys Scottish dancing because long ago the Clunies-Ross taught me when I was fourteen, fifteen years old. Oh, I was so many dancing, when I was about twenty-four or something like that. I can still do it, that's why I teach the younger boys.'

The respect the Cocos Malay boys in particular have for Nek Su is clearly evident in the brief amount of time I have spent on Home Island. It makes sense to me that he would want to pass his knowledge on, that he felt he had a strong role to play mentoring the next generation of Cocos Malay people as they make their

way into adulthood in this unique, but also rapidly changing, culture. I wonder if Jeannette feels the same way.

'So Jeannette, you'll be staying too, then?' I ask, smiling.

'Yes,' she answers, 'I'll be here as long as he's here. And then, I don't know. I don't really think about it. I just take life as it comes, really. I am accepted here for who I am. I am a member of the Shire Council now; I can teach first aid and I am treasurer of the Jukong Club. My skills can be utilised. I understand the community and I know the people and I know how the community works, sort of. I don't know if you think about this, but the deeper and deeper you get into a community the more you realise what you don't know. It all changes. I am accepted but then I am not accepted, but that's okay because I am different, you know? I go and pray at the mosque, I fast, yet though we all pray together, I didn't grow up with the Cocos Malay, Nek did. Nek Su grew up with every single one of them. But I believe the Cocos Malay know and respect where I am coming from.'

'So as long as Nek's here, this is your home?' I ask.

'This is my home, yes.'

Leaving Jeannette and Nek Su's place, I am buoyed by the feeling of warmth and connection I have experienced in their company. There is so much to process from what they have shared with me I can barely think. I make my way through the kampong heading toward the shops, but as I do, I glimpse the island's aging figs leaning over the road, framing the ferry and the dazzling blues of the lagoon. The colour draws me, and instead of getting lunch as I had planned, I find myself walking along the foreshore, past the jetty and into the grounds of Oceania House. A lush hush falls over the day and a fecund, acidic smell of rotting leaves, reminiscent of Christmas Island rises from under my feet. On my left are iron gates now rusted in a gesture of invitation, permanently open. From the gates a high, mossy brick wall marks the edge of what was the Clunies-Ross estate, from behind which rises a tower of tropical plants that screens the rest of my view. On my right the ocean is continually framed by large, spreading trees, their mature branches forming canopies so wide that as I continue walking, I experience the sensation I am moving through a glowing tunnel of green and yellow leaves.

When I reach the former Clunies-Ross mansion, I can see the current owners are not on the island, so I make my way up to the impressive green and white two-storey residence. I consider the logistics of building such a palatial home: bricks imported by ship from Glasgow, gardens rich with soil carted nine hundred kilometres from Christmas Island, making all the abundance and beauty possible. I am both awed and disturbed as imagine the former grandeur of Oceania House and its surrounds, made possible by the hard labour of the Cocos Malay. Hard labour—I feel my breath draw in in a sudden gasp. *Surely not*, I think to myself as I hurriedly put my bag down on the ground, and dig around to find my notebook, *surely not*. I look back through the notes I have made from the *Clunies-Ross Chronicle*, and it is then the penny drops, 'The Christmas Island Phosphate Company was incorporated in London on the 14th of January 1897...Murray and Ross sold to the company their lease for 500 paid-up shares each.'

George Clunies-Ross and Sir John Murray together discovered the rich deposits of phosphate on Christmas Island in February 1896. Clunies-Ross was a major shareholder in the company, as were many members of his extended family. These shares were not sold until 1949 after the Second World War. The Clunies-Ross family were not only incredibly wealthy from the exploitation of the Cocos Malay, the Clunies-Ross also made enormous amounts of money from the Chinese indentured labour imported to Christmas Island. Together with Murray, the Clunies-Ross were major investors in a mine that caused incredible suffering to a large number of Chinese workers over a period of forty-five years. Early labourers, some as young as thirteen, worked eleven-hour days six days a week and eight hours on Sunday. Between October 1900 and December 1902 alone, three hundred and thirteen men working the mines had died. No wonder the Clunies-Rosses thought they treated the Cocos Malay like their children, when on a nearby island just out of sight, this same family showed indifference expressed in the extreme to the lives of Chinese labourers who, for all intents and purposes, were slaves.

I stand, looking up at the sheer width and breadth of Oceania House. To the north and west wings of the house, verandahs shade wooden French windows and doors that must frame spectacular views of the sea. I try to take in all the deeply disturbing pieces of the Clunies-Ross legacy that are coming together. The grounds

around me are full of walls and shadows. There is no-one around, so I walk right up to the verandah and peer through the glass to get a view of the front rooms. A teak staircase spirals artfully through the house's full height in the entry way, and in what must be a study, a wood-panelled room holds spine upon spine of well-ordered books. I wonder if the texts originally belonged to the Clunies-Ross. What did the family hold in their collection, and what it could tell us about the minds of the men who held onto power and privilege for so long in this very place?

Around the back, Oceania House continues to ramble on, even bigger than I realised, never having come so close to the building when I had visited Home Island before. Room has been added onto room, but the extensions appear more recent, and though large, lack the grandeur of the front facade. Weeds push up through concrete, paint wears from back walls, everything seems a little ramshackle and overgrown. On this side of the home are what seem like copra sheds, and I guess that the building beyond where I am standing was the estate's office that was converted into a classroom when John Clunies-Ross attempted to start a school in the grounds of Oceania House in 1967.

I wander through the different walled sections, some brick, some limestone. Embedded in the walls are small, arched alcoves; in the doorways, carved wooden lintels spiral gracefully in the corners above my head. Yellow blossoms cascade from high trees, bamboo forms its own small forest, frangipani flowers fragrance the air and, by a disused dovecote, giant palms fan themselves resplendently, netting tropical sun. It is still beautiful here, but sad, a tired memory, haunted by suffering, a broken and exclusive dream that no longer has a place on this atoll. In the distance I can see the large monuments of the family's graves. I wonder if Johnny ever comes here anymore.

Suddenly, the call to prayer rises up from the mosque and in that moment, it feels like time is suspended, the universe paused and I pause with it, an expansiveness drawing my eyes from the gardens up into the canopy and sky above. Then the chant ends just as abruptly and I realise I am completely surrounded by mosquitos, so I push on, moving quickly now, out through a crumbling section of the estate's walls, between large stacks of sandbags stored in sun, to the kampong where I can see the shops are closed as people have left to get

to the mosque for afternoon prayers. As I look at the buildings, I notice one neon sign in a door that flashes 'OPEN'. I push on the door and a small bell rings as I step into the fibro building filled wall to wall with bright packaging; lollies, long-life milk, oceanic wall hangings, sports shirts and women's blouses, children's toys, fishing supplies and umbrellas. In the middle of this abundant display, I am surprised to see my friend Ossie, Azie's Dad—a fit, amiable and entrepreneurial Home Islander in his early forties I first met through the cultural tours he ran on Home Island when I first arrived in 2012.

'Hey, Mak Greta!' Ossie says, looking surprised. 'What are you doing here?'

'Ossie,' I laugh, 'so good to see you!'

We hug and it feels so normal, but surreal, to be meeting people I had known on this small atoll but assumed I would never see again. We talk about our families, give updates on our partners and children, Ossie telling me that he and his family are thinking about moving back to Perth. We discuss the pros and cons, the weight of the decision, as customers come in and out of the door.

I tell Ossie about my research as well as my conversation with Jeannette and Nek Su and ask if he would like to be involved. He is interested in what I am doing, but hesitant to agree after also witnessing the misrepresentation of islander views in the SBS documentary on education on the Cocos Islands. We chat and chat and it just feels so easy to be with him, and I enjoy the relief of familiarity after spending so much time out of my comfort zone on my trip, the wonderful ordinariness to be spending time with someone I knew as a friend.

'Salaam,' a man calls as he enters suddenly through the door.

'Salaam,' Ossie replies, and they chat in Cocos Malay as the man tries to decide what flavour cool drink he is going to buy and, smiling at me, seems to be asking in a friendly fashion who I am.

The man waves, leaves. A radio speaks to itself in Malay in the background. Ossie turns it down, and, looking a little nervous, says it is okay, he would like to help me, that if I would like to ask him some questions it would be okay. Coming from the larger world of Malaysia, I know living in a tight community has not always been easy for Ossie, so I can understand why this is not an easy decision for him. However, what I know of Ossie's story is intriguing to me, his family part of the large

group of Cocos Islanders that moved to Sabah in the late 1940s and early 1950s when Home Island's population was at its peak. What is it like to be a Malay-born Australian and Cocos Islander? Where, for Ossie, is home?

Ossie tells me his father was born on the Cocos (Keeling) Islands, but he left for Tawau (now Sabah) in the North of Borneo after the Second World War. The Second World War had a huge impact on the Cocos (Keeling) Islands. At its peak, there were eight thousand three hundred military personnel on the atoll, and a large amount of clearing took place as coconuts were removed for the construction of a new runway on West Island. The new arrivals dramatically altered the economy: much of the copra harvesting gave way to a bartering economy, leaving the plantations largely neglected. The sudden end of the war left the local economy in ruins. The Clunies-Ross had been living abroad during the period of conflict, and on their return, decided that the best solution was to push the islanders toward emigration.

Tawau was seen by the Clunies-Rosses (and the islands' British administrators in Singapore) as a suitable solution to Home Island's unemployment and over-population issues. A development company was seeking to restore an abandoned Japanese estate in the area and needed recruits to work on its palm oil plantation. The Clunies-Rosses allowed the Cocos Malay to be deliberately deceived into thinking Tawau was just like Cocos, and large numbers of people were shipped off the atoll, starting with one hundred and eighty emigrants in 1949. As the Cocos Malay were 'deck passengers', many Cocos Islanders became seriously ill or died on the voyage to Borneo from diseases such as pneumonia. The separation of the close community was incredibly traumatic, the effects of the fragmentation of this isolated population still being felt today. The offer was a one-way ticket, and when the Cocos Malay arrived at their new home, they were shocked to find they had been misled. The plantation was far from the ocean, the climate was dramatically different, as it was hotter and characterised by wet and dry monsoons. The working conditions were hard and many of the Cocos Malay died from malaria and other diseases that their bodies had not been previously exposed to. Some of the Cocos emigrants even went mad and one woman is known to have committed suicide.

Ossie was born in Sabah and lived there until he was fourteen years old. He says he had a happy childhood in a small community, but that Cocos was always in his family's consciousness. He remembers in particular the stories about how wonderful fishing was on the atoll, but amongst these stories were also those of mistreatment of the Cocos Malay and the hard living and working conditions people experienced there. When his father heard the news that the Australian Government had taken control of the Cocos (Keeling) Islands, Ossie's father knew that life on Cocos was going to improve, so he applied to immigrate back to the place of this birth. In 1989, Ossie's father was finally successful and the family returned to the Cocos (Keeling) Islands.

'When we were in Sabah,' Ossie tells me, 'the only language we were speaking in Malaysia was Malay, so even though there was an English subject to study, we just turned a blind eye to it. Then when I arrived, I realised how important English was because by then there was a proper school because the island had been taken over by the Australian government. So then I am thinking 'Oh no,' you know, I was fourteen and I could not go to primary school because I was too old, but the I could not go to high school because I could not speak the language. So I had to make a drastic decision, what was I going to do?'

Ultimately Ossie made the difficult decision to leave Cocos and moved to Perth where he was able to stay with family. Though only fourteen, Ossie managed to enrol in an adult English class at an adult migrant centre. Though unqualified, through sheer initiative and hard work, Ossie eventually secured a job as a fitter and turner. He stayed at the job for several years, supporting his mother back in Malaysia until he was able to bring her to Australia.

'In the back of my mind, I always want to live on the mainland,' Ossie tells me, 'As much as Cocos is a lovely place to stay, you do feel a sense of freedom, if you like, on the mainland…'

'Is it claustrophobic here sometimes?' I ask.

'Yes and no,' Ossie replies. 'It is because you are living in such a small community, you constantly need to keep your eyes open all the time. What I mean by that is that there are things you can and can't do. There are always people that are going to judge you, what you do, and there are always people who are going to

think that what you do is wrong. You can never please people. But if you were on the mainland, for example, it is a bigger world out there, you can mind your own business.'

'You are more anonymous,' I say.

'Exactly,' Ossie answers. 'You could go down the beach in your bikini, if you like, and no-one is going to question why you do that. You could have five jobs and no-one cares. Unfortunately, here if you do that, people think you are a bit different. So there are challenges living in a small community because everyone expects you to blend in and do the same thing over and over again. If you experience the outside world and then come and live here, it is a bit hard because you have to try and adapt to the way people live on Home Island.'

I think of Ossie and his work in the shop on Home Island, and his role when I first met him as a tour guide, charismatic and articulate in his second language, explaining the Cocos Malay culture to visiting tourists. During the time that I lived on Cocos, Ossie was also collaborating with Tony on West Island to produce a line of local gourmet foods. I wonder what pressures are placed on Ossie to go with the flow of the way things are on Home Island, a world where there is no place for 'tall poppies', where I have met wives who had arrived from Singapore and, after ten years, were only just beginning to feel let in.

The conservative culture of the Cocos Malay people is something also noted by Pauline Bunce. Bunce writes:

> The Cocos Malay community is a reserved and self-contained social world. The underlying principle involved in every interpersonal relationship is the continued maintenance of social harmony. Islanders rarely speak directly to a new person or confront someone with whom they have had a grievance… Persons who act against the social order may be shunned by the wider community…The extended family is the focus of all social life and the standpoint from which all community events are evaluated…The Cocos Malay egalitarian, Islamic view of society does not permit the growth of many 'tall poppies' and people who display unwarranted ambition.

I experienced Cocos Malay culture as so peaceful and cohesive when I lived on the atoll, it is interesting now to be challenged by Bunce's observations and Ossie's experiences. While Home Island life is incredibly stable and the culture strong, I can see how for some who have had different experiences or hold different priorities, this larger social cohesion can come at a cost.

'And that is always why it is in the back of my mind that, for me personally anyway, I always wanted to move back to Australia.' Ossie says. I think of the delicate dance he must do to try to meet the needs of his family, the wishes of his beautiful Cocos Malay wife, Christine, and his twin high school-aged children immersed in their life on Home Island.

I ask Ossie if he thinks of himself as predominantly a Cocos Islander, an Australian or a Malaysian. Ossie tells me when he is in Perth he thinks of himself as an Australian and when he is on the Cocos (Keeling) Islands he thinks of himself as Cocos Malay. For him, his experience of self is largely in response to the part of his identity that is being re-enforced by the culture around him. He tells me his father always reminded him to say he was Australian or Cocos Malay, never to say he was Malaysian. This confused Ossie, and he wondered where his father was coming from. Later Ossie realised the reason behind his father's position. As we had already discussed, Ossie's father was born on Cocos and circumstances beyond his control had forced him to leave, a decision that resulted in his family becoming Malaysian citizens. His father had worked hard for the family to return to the place where he was born. Ossie's father believed that as Cocos is part of Australia, and his father's decedents were the original inhabitants of the Cocos (Keeling) Islands, that he was essentially a unique, indigenous Australian, indigenous to this isolated part of the nation. He wanted Ossie to own this distinctive heritage.

I begin to realise that Ossie and I have been talking for some time, as young children spill into the shop still dressed in their yellow and blue school uniforms. They smile shyly, buy juices and lollies and leave as a small group, chatting quietly as they climb into the back of their parents' golf buggies.

'I don't know if you know the story about Johnny's mother who passed away,' Ossie says. 'Johnny Clunies-Ross, his mum, Daphne, passed away in Perth but her ashes are here. Not many people know the story or, if they do, they don't really

understand it. I remember about ten years ago, Johnny's father and mum, they always wanted to retire here, they were hoping to die here, but there is no place for them, nowhere for them to stay. But in the back of their mind, you have probably heard the story about how some people liked them and some people hated them because of what they did with the coconut planation and the issue of money. In the back of their mind they keep that knowledge there, that people hated them more than liked them, that is how it was planted in their mind, not necessarily how we feel. They thought we hated them but the good thing about us is we forgive and forget. This is how Cocos Islanders are now. You could treat us bad, Reneé, but three or four months down the track, we would say, 'Hi Reneé, how's it going?' and we would forget all about what had happened.

But John Clunies-Ross's wife thought we hated their guts so that is why it took her a long time to come back here. But I remember when they came back and people heard they were coming, but she was wondering, how on earth are we going to be treated? She probably thought they were going to be boo-ed or we would throw eggs, but to her surprise, when she arrived we treated her and John like a king and queen, like how we treated them when they were the king and queen on the island back then. She could not believe it. All the mums came and the people with the drums all sitting there welcoming them. Now it could be a story that is made up or it could be true, but what I heard on the grapevine is that when she came here she was healthy and when she went back she became sick. When Daphne went back to the mainland, she could not move on or leave her past behind. She could not believe how she was welcomed after what she had done to us. I heard she felt so sad, she died of a broken heart.

My Dad always reminds me that whether people think that what the Clunies-Rosses did was good or not, at the end of the day, look how we ended up, look how things turned out for us. Yes, my great, great grandfather had a hard life, but their sacrifices led us to where we are now, we have a good life. My ancestors were originally from Indonesia and if my ancestors never came here and my father and I were born in Indonesia, things could be very different, they could be worse. The Cocos people made good of the situation for themselves. It is a sensitive topic to talk about because you are always going to have people with a different view

about the Clunies-Ross's role here, but my Dad always said the Clunies-Rosses should be awarded a medal. I asked, "Why is that, Dad?" And he'd tell me it is because, like I said, how things have turned out in the end.'

Ossie's story has had me intrigued, has drawn me in, so much so, that I have lost track of the time. The arrival of the school children must have given my subconscious a subtle clue, because suddenly I realise it is after two-thirty and the ferry is about to go.

'Oh no, Ossie, I am going to miss the ferry!' I exclaim.

Ossie looks at his watch and agrees, 'Quick, you better go!'

'I'm so sorry,' I say. 'This has been so helpful, I really appreciate your time.'

'No worries,' he says, 'but really, you better run…'

'I know' I say, and I wave, sprinting out the door, relieved to see they have not untied the ferry or the ramp to get on board, so I may just make it in time. As my bag bounces against my back, running into the glare of the afternoon sun, I can't help but wonder at this strange shifting and unpredictable place that continually reinvents itself, a cartographer's nemesis, a castaway's dream. Just when I think I know how things work on the horseshoe of sand in the middle of the sea, something always moves, a new layer is uncovered, and I have to reassess what I thought I had learnt, start my mapping all over again.

24

Direction Island

(Pulu Tikus)

Two days after my trip to Home Island, I find myself at Rumah Baru once again. This morning I am early as I have ridden Trish's bike to the ferry terminal in an attempt to get some exercise before I spend a day on the beaches of Direction Island. As I wander along the palm-lined foreshore to the right of the jetty, I reach the place where large figs lean their trunks low, resting their limbs' woody elbows in the water, when suddenly the events of a remarkable morning come back to me. When my family and I lived here in 2013, Ash and I had been walking along this stretch of sand looking for our tent after a camping trip that went dramatically wrong. The dinghy that we had been towing behind our catamaran, filled with our camping supplies, had tipped in high winds on our way to South Island, spilling all of our carefully packed possessions into the sea. The following day, much to our surprise, our prediction of currents was right, and we found our tent tangled in the roots of these very trees. We continued walking, wondering what else we might reclaim, when we were met by the most shocking and remarkable sight.

There on the beach just past the figs washed up by the morning tide, was the enormous form of an eleven-foot tiger shark. Our hearts skipped a beat, our base brains shouting that we should be extremely careful and very afraid. Slowly we her circled her form, quiet and in awe, checking that the enormous creature was indeed dead. Then gaining confidence, we approached her streamlined design, admiring the beautiful pattern of her denticles, the sea floor's shadows echoed in the nuance of her tigery stripes. I pored over her soft face, surprised by the amber colour of her iris, lit bright by the day's full sun. It was as I gazed at her streamlined snout that I suddenly saw it, felt my body jolt again. On the underside of her jaws, the most sensory part of a tiger shark's form, pushed into the softness of her skin, was the incision of a blade repeatedly driven in.

I don't push past the figs this time around as I know the ferry will leave soon. I glance back once more, almost seeing the shark's monstrous shape, then quickly make my way back to the jetty. Once it departs the ferry first heads out to Home Island, then makes its way back to markers in the reef that show the channel out to Direction Island. In this watery place, white sand reflects the light back though liquid in perhaps the most iridescent of blues of anywhere on atoll. Dolphins rush in from both sides and begin to race the ferry, zooming in and out of its wake then, after a while, seem to tire of the game and speed away. I begin photographing the green and blue markers with the image of a large, blue boat in the atoll's entry behind, when through my lens I realise what I am looking at. Framed in my lens is the same turn back boat I witnessed at the end of my time on Christmas Island. The large Navy ship has been parked between West and Horsburgh Islands for most the time I have been on the atoll, but I had not realised as it was so far in the distance, it was not clear to the naked eye. I curse its presence under my breath and put my camera away, yet happily this very stretch of the journey is also marked by a far more positive experience of those who preside over Australia's borders.

In 2013, on a Saturday morning as my husband and I took the same boat ride to Direction Island, I was amazed to realise the ferry was approaching a cluster of bright Sri Lankan fishing boats moored in the centre of the lagoon. As we got closer, I could see there were Customs officials working on the decks, their inflatable Zodiac tied to the side. As the ferry came closer still, I and the passengers on board began to realise the colourful vessels still had asylum seekers on board. I held my breath, this was a time when there were growing tensions over the new arrivals, and it felt like a litmus test as to how the community and a handful of tourists were going to respond. I ran up to the top deck and raised my hand in a long, slow wave just as some of the men on the boat, all donning bright orange lifejackets, also began to wave at the people on the ferry. There was a pause, then a collective shift as people began to understand what was happening, and people on the ferry raised their hands high and waved in return. A Customs official on the top deck smiled and waved at us too. The asylum seekers on the fishing boats laughed and smiled and

waved their arms higher still, and it felt like lightness, I felt like dancing. In that moment, our small gestures felt like the most hopeful thing in the world.

On Direction Island, the only boats arriving these days are yachts, and there is an influx of them, red yachts, white yachts, yellow and blue yachts, moored in the tranquil waters of the bay. The yachties' dinghies hum to and from the anchored vessels to shore, washing hangs in sun from the boats' metal rails. The ferry pulls in and we all spill out, quickly marking out spots in the shade in-between the busy scuttling of hermit crabs. After all the intensity of the interviews, this time of silence and relative solitude is just what I need. I spread out my towel and start to read my book in the shade.

After a while, I wander along the shore, the scene pristine in the extreme. I strip down to my bathers and sink into the balmy water, watching the boats' bright colours against blue of sea and sky. As I swim further out I hear my name called, and realise the person sitting in the immaculate white motorboat anchored just off the island's shore is my old neighbour, Di. I swim over, climb in and we chat for a while, enjoying the warm tendrils of sun on our backs. As I am about to go, Di asks if I want to swim out to the Cabbage Patch. I flinch, I have heard of this dive spot, know this beautiful coral mound is quite a bit further out, and I am really quite scared of the atolls' abundance of sharks.

'We can swim out with The Rip,' Di says, 'and Ian can bring the boat round and pick us up so we don't have to swim back.'

I am frightened by the idea, but I agree. My possible prognosis of cancer seems to have afforded me a new freedom. The fact that I am aware that I don't know how much time I have left (which, strictly speaking, is a daily reality for all of us) has afforded me a new immediacy, made me prepared to take greater risks. Di and I walk down the long stretch of sand to the reef, palm trees softening the midday sun along the bright white of the shore. Ahead of us, we can see the gap in the reef where the swift waters of The Rip run through, behind which, the surviving stand of trees on Prison Island cling to remnants of the island's dune.

We pull on our masks and flippers that Di had stored in the boat and push out across The Rip's aptly named strong current, kicking hard to make it across the

deep channel to the slower waters on the other side. Once I make it across, I cling to a rocky knoll on the other side to stop myself getting swept along as I catch my breath. I duck back under the surface, and the water's current means I don't need to move, instead I effortlessly glide by the sea's own menagerie. There are some fish here than I can name, but so many more that I do not know. I let my body descend down the ledge of reef where angel fish and neons come in and out of swaying soft corals. Moving unhurriedly over the sandy channel between the reef's cliffs, I can see leatherjackets, rock cod, tuskfish, parrotfish and wrasse, as well as strange, silver fish watching me in slow moving schools. Thin, striped fish gather under plates of coral as if waiting under a wide, textured umbrella. There are unicorn fish with their outrageous horns, shy blue trevally with their iridescent designs and, curiously, dark sharks sleeping on the ocean floor with their heads tucked out of sight under a lip of reef. As the channel widens and slows, a barracuda flashes silver in sun, its mouth crowded with row upon row of tiny blades.

Di is already well ahead of me, but as I turn to kick away from the sandy shallows and head out to the deep, something catches my eye. I move slowly forward and then realise what I am seeing is a hawksbill, a critically endangered sea turtle, bending its head toward something that has caught its eye on the sea floor. The small turtle sees me, but when I stop moving, it decides I am not a threat and continues to forage with its pointed beak in the sand. I stay, hovering like that for some time, watching the turtle feed, utterly enchanted, until I feel a whack on my back and wonder why Di, even in jest, would slap me so hard. I turn around and there is no one, nothing, there. I am unnerved, and despite the beautiful sight of the hawksbill, I look around quickly to see if I can find Di. My heart is beating hard in my chest, but now I doubt myself. After all I saw nothing, perhaps I imagined the sensation and nothing actually happened.

Soon a large, coral knoll comes into view and over its shape I can see Di swimming. I kick toward her feeling a little less brave and very relieved to have her company. Over the knoll a huge array of corals grow, and amongst the coral yet more fish hide and feed amongst its colour and texture. As we move along a series of other outcrops, a large black-tipped reef shark glides slowly toward us. I stare at it which causes the shark to warily watch me as we pass each other, and I kick

myself, knowing my fear of reef sharks is irrational and only makes the sleek creatures more edgy.

As the reef formation comes into view, I can see how the Cabbage Patch earned its name. Over a large, round piece of reef around ten metres wide is a proliferation of distinctive yellow coral that arranges itself much like a cabbage forms, as a series of wide, flat and interlocking leaves. We hover over the shape of the outcrop, taking in its colour, yellow striking against the deeper water's azure blues, a cloud of fish rising, hovering like hundreds of equally yellow insects echoing the underwater bloom.

Out in the blue water, just beyond where Di and I now swim, friends had taken me out for a dive from their boat when I first arrived on the atoll. As we headed into the blue, several dolphins had come to play in the boat's wake and my friend Gav had started to play with them, turning his boat in tight circles, doing doughnuts, churning up wake, until more and more dolphins came to join the fray. After a while, Gav stopped the boat and we all quickly put on our flippers and masks, easing ourselves into the warm water. Instead of being frightened, the dolphins seemed to think our entry into their world was an event. Six or seven bottlenoses raced in, circling us, zooming off and coming back, swimming playfully underneath us or gliding past at face height, looking curiously into our eyes.

We swam away from the boat, and still the dolphins sped around us, clicking and calling, coming so close I could see the sucker fish riding on their bellies, the damage and scarring to one of the dolphin's dorsal fins. The light traced white, laced patterns on the greys of their skin, and all around us the water resonated with the deepest sapphire shade. In a moment I could barely believe to be true, a mother dolphin swam toward me with her calf. They came so close I could have reached out and touched them, like she was showing me, showing off her young.

Then, as though wanting to continue the spirit of the initial game of chasing the boat, one young dolphin began swimming up to the surface of the water, leaping out and then turning, speeding straight down, picking up a hapless sea cucumber lying on the ocean floor, throwing it high and spinning into blue light, and catching it again in its snout. There was no doubt in my mind that these wild creatures had come simply to meet us, they wanted an event, they wanted to play.

They checked us out, tried to start a new game, but we were such slow moving creatures in their world, I suspect we may have been a bit of a disappointment. Still, the dolphins seemed curious and hopeful. When we finally appeared to lose our novelty and the avenues of exchange became exhausted, the dolphins slowly turned and quietly went on their way.

After Ian picks Di and me up in the boat, Ian drops me back on Direction Island. It is nearly time for the return ferry to arrive. I quickly gather my things and walk out to the jetty. If you miss your ride home from Direction Island there is no way back to West Island other than an incredibly long swim, and no mobile reception with which to hatch a Plan B. I drink in my last view of the island from the elevated perspective of the two-storey ferry, gazing down over the aqua curve of clear water, the lush crowns of palms swaying in the wind.

Heading back to West Island, I am exhausted from my day of sun and salt. Suddenly the ocean seems tiring, exposing, and I long for the solidity of land, look forward to being inside, to a hot shower and the shelter of four walls. Nevertheless, on the afternoon ride home, I make my way up to the top deck and watch the northern islets slip away. The sky has turned cloudy now, washing the sea with dark grey, light breaking through the gouache of clouds in smatters of silver. I see the turn back boat anchored further out has also lost its colour, turning into a suggestion on the horizon, a distant, shadowy blur. It is up here on this deck, salt-caked and spent, I suddenly realise I want to go home. Though I am deeply grateful to be in this extraordinary place, I miss my family and I want to be with them, I miss the warm tone of my husband's voice, the lightness and wit that is the company of my daughter. I want to be able to be anonymous again. I want to see a band in a pub. I want gallery openings and writing groups. I want to live in a place that is not this shifting, restless surface. I don't want a life so deeply steeped in sea.

25

North Point

On my second-last morning, I wander out again to the front of Number 32 and to the beach beyond, where I had cried with happiness, and in confusion, the day after I had first arrived all those years ago. Leaving the atoll this time around feels so final, the airfares so extraordinarily expensive, again I am filled with the strange realisation that I don't know if I will ever return.

I sit on the strip of white sand at the water's edge and dig my toes into its softness. Around my feet, red and tawny hermit crabs navigate their small Sahara, bodies busy with the endless business of finding food. I can see the tide is going out and imagine it being drawn on great strings of the moon. For a moment, the world is hushed. The wind dances like a small child around my ears, and the waves say *hush, hush*. Like so many times before on this tenuous sandbar, I feel hushed and small, the world has reminded me it is big, so big. Grey cloud settles in the stratosphere.

Though my overwhelming experience was a life lived in peace in this place, not all my days were balmed by the islands' beauty. Some days I resented the sea so intensely—like a dazzling, demanding lover, it was always in my eyes, filling my ears, leaving its trace on my skin. One evening, when we were quite new on the atoll and I was still reeling from the death of my father, Pete and Emma had invited us around to dinner. It had been a warm reprieve, this growing sense of friendship after all the challenges of moving and mourning. After our meal, we sat and watched surf movies together, chatting and laughing and drinking wine. Then suddenly, the police appeared at the door. They called my husband aside, talking in subdued voices standing in shadow on the driveway. They had come tell us that my husband's forty-six-year-old brother had experienced a heart attack. Two hours before, Ash's brother had fallen in a friend's bathroom and suddenly died.

Grief gave way to anger. I resented the world, I resented the atoll, the sea, the islands' innate transience, a world in flux. I needed to control my life. I needed

to stop losing the people I loved, I needed to protect my husband and defend my fifteen-year-old daughter from having to experience any more suffering. But everything around me said *relent.* The swell worked at me all night. The elemental powers that whirled around me told me that my will meant nothing; on its scale my actions were barely perceptible. Out on the horizon people were drowning, I found their bags, I found their lifejackets and shoes. I raged and I fought and stayed angry as if this somehow made me strong. Then one afternoon, as I sat watching the tide moving steadily away as I do now, crabs eating at the body of a small shark, the tideline scattered with pieces of broken boat and children's sneakers, something in me gave way. In that moment, I deeply understood and accepted my insignificance, accepted everything over which I did not, and never had, control: the slow, cruel death of my father, the mortality of the people that I loved, the incredible suffering that continued to play out even on this atoll's shores, a world that would not stop moving and changing. For a moment I was utterly bereft. Then, unexpectedly, I found myself imbued with an incredible sense of lightness and peace. In that moment I had lost a war but, in my new humility, I found I could let the whole shifting and fluvial world in. I was broken, finally broken wide open.

For my last two nights, I have moved into Trish and Tony's house, where one of her boys has generously given up his room. It feels good to end my journey here in this hub that for two years was my stand-in family, Trish often felt like a sister to me. The four boys seem to enjoy the novelty of my presence — I am an extra pair of hands, two extra ears. The boys and I play dinosaurs in the lounge room, I run and supervise baths, chop tomatoes in a small team as we all help with dinner. As we are eating our meals on my first night in their home, Tony's phone bings at the end of the table.

'Ah, well you'd be interested in this, Reneé,' Tony says, reading the screen. 'It's Ossie wanting to get through to Johnny. There is a Cocos Islander from Sabah who lived here fifty-three years ago wanting to get his birth certificate from Johnny Clunies-Ross.'

'What?' I reply, 'surely not, surely the Clunies-Rosses do not still have their birth certificates?'

‘Apparently so,’ Tony says, as he messages the request to Johnny, and indeed Johnny messages back that he has the birth certificate and will leave the Cocos Malay man a copy, in keeping with tradition, for an exchange of food.

Finally, my last night in the Indian Ocean Territories comes around. Trish has organised a going away picnic dinner for me at the beach. We grab our things and jump in the car, all squeezing hip to hip in the 4WD. Soon we arrive at North Point. Tony parks the car and we walk through the tunnel of palms that frames the bright spit of sand, behind which the lagoon’s waters jostle, swirling and foaming, tide pushing against the swell as makes its way back out to sea. I sit with a group of friends both old and new, steeped in a sense of their love and acceptance both of me and of what it is that I am needing to do out here on the islands. I have experienced nothing but generosity and goodwill on Cocos, and I feel so grateful, so humbled, and so incredibly thankful to simply be alive. Days after my return to the mainland, I will write that my return to the Indian Ocean Territories has been one of the biggest blessings of my life. My notes go on to say what I feel I have learnt and, writing now, three years later, they still strike a chord:

> I realised I had to go back to understand where I had been. I had to go back to map the terrain that had affected me so profoundly. And the profound shift came from my move away from striving for independence. After Massom’s attempted suicide, the death of Dad and Ash’s brother, and the relentless badgering of the ocean, the massive relenting, the relief at finally admitting I could not control my own life. And from that grief, the gift. Witnessing not powerlessness, but interdependence, like a fine cloth, a silken web woven through everything. The lifeful-ness of it. The richness of it. To find myself on the islands listening to others, to be thrown wide open once more, to other people and their deepest stories, finding my own humanity again.

The light starts to fade on our little gathering and we begin to gather our things. Tony puts out the fire and the clouds transform the light into a monochrome

painting of blue-grey sky. A military plane arcs around the edge of the atoll and comes in to land.

Once back at Trish and Tony's, Trish and I lie on her son's bed, talking. We laugh about the last time we were together out at North Point, staying well after sunset by the light of the fire. As we had been chatting, we had noticed a Navy boat going back and forth in the dark outside the reef in front of us. Then, as if from nowhere, three Customs officers stepped out of the bushes surrounding our small group, large flashlights in their hands shining in directly into our eyes. The officers seemed embarrassed when they realised it was just our two, white families having a picnic together by the sea. Perhaps they were confused as they could not make out the colour of our skin through the lens of their infra-red binoculars, or perhaps it was the Sri Lankan mat we were sitting on that threw them, a mat Trish had found the day she discovered the messages left by Tamil asylum seekers on North Keeling.

26

Heading Home

On my final morning in the Indian Ocean Territories, the day is quiet and still. As I pack my last things, I have the house to myself, Trish has left for work, the older boys for school, and Tony and little Tiago have gone to work on The Farm. To be alone in this final moment feels so right. When I finally set off for the short walk to the airport, the small wheels of my suitcase cause my bag to rattle madly as I drag it over the bitumen. Out on the reef, I watch for the last time as the turtles' heads come up to the surface to breathe between sets, comical, like a child's game. Soon I arrive at the airport's foyer and I stand in the short queue waiting to check in, looking at the Cocos Malay milling under a large tree as they wait on West Island for someone either arriving or leaving. Suddenly I see a long arm wave to me from further up the line and I realise that, several people down from me, looking smart in a blue-checked shirt, is the distinctive form of Nek Su.

'It's okay, Mak,' he says, 'I have told them you are here. I have moved your seat; you are sitting next to me.'

I laugh, taken aback that it is even possible to check someone else in and move their seat on a major airline without their consent, but then I am flattered that Nek felt comfortable and wanted to do so. It seems such a fitting way to end my journey.

Soon the plane's engines roar, and the outrageous blues of the atoll disappear like a brilliant dream behind us as we are surrounded by a vista of endless sea. It is a bonus having Nek's company for the one-and-a-half-hour flight to Christmas Island. Nek tells me he is heading to the hospital on Christmas Island as he is having trouble with his heart. I quietly hope that he will be okay. It is comfortable between us. We talk about island weddings and trips to Perth, then somehow get onto the subject of the challenges of living on an atoll with so many sharks.

‘I find it amazing, considering how many sharks there are in the lagoon, that no-one on the atoll has ever been attacked.’ I say.

‘That is why I got that one,’ Nek tells me, ‘that long pole, with a knife. If I see that tiger shark, I just get him. It’s best just to get him, then, that way, not so many sharks.’

‘What, you stab them?’ I ask, unable to hide my shock, ‘even if they aren’t worrying you?’

‘Yes, when I am fishing I just sneak up, that tiger does not even know I am coming.’

As Nek talks, it slowly dawns on me that it is highly likely that the person who killed the exquisite creature I found washed up near Rumah Baru was Nek Su. I know I will have to find it in myself sometime to forgive him, but for now I laugh at the irony that this gorgeous gentleman I have come to adore killed something I loved. It seems even at this distant point the atoll is still teaching me, keeping me on my toes.

Outside my window, the Indian Ocean still spreads itself like a richly dyed cloth over the earth’s curved surface. Small tufts of cloud are mirrored as shadows. The clouds begin to gather and become thicker the closer we get to Christmas Island, until we are eventually completely swallowed by a sea of white light. Emerging out the other side, we sit above the dense canopy of green, interrupted only by the red wounds of phosphate mines, then suddenly we are bouncing along the tarmac, plane brakes screeching and wing shields roaring as we grind to a sudden halt. As we walk across the tarmac, I can see people with their faces pressed up against the fencing. Just inside the glass door of the airport reception, Border Force tape divides us into those staying and those moving on. Nek and I say farewell, warmly shaking hands, and as he passes me again on the other side of the tape he gently squeezes my arm. I savour the moment, the easy affection between two new friends, as we walk toward our separate doors.

When it is time for the plane to leave once more, rain begins to pour and we are handed colourful golf umbrellas to make our way across the tarmac. Once we are all finally seated and the cabin doors locked, the plane taxies slowly to the edge of the runway, where it turns around, humming and vibrating. Sound bursts from

the propellers and the aircraft accelerates rapidly, pushing up into sky, until golden bosuns are shining below me, disappearing as the clouds close their curtain once more. Heading home. The thought is like the memory of sunlight, of something brilliant and golden. Every cell in my body wills me on my way. I sit in silence as, in my own company, I am starting to process that I am also flying into a future I am unsure of. I don't yet know that my diagnosis will be all clear—the strange shape into which the moles have grown is simply the 'trauma' of a scrape. Receiving this news will be an incredible moment in which I feel I am gifted back my life on my return. Yet I can't help but wonder if it is this very uncertainty that has made my experiences on the islands so raw, so rich. I also don't know that my book will be published and go on to win a major award. This award will allow me the incredible opportunity to tell the story of one of my young students, Ali Reza, who I taught while his family was in detention for eleven months. Through social media, the story of Ali Reza (videoed as I made a speech in front of state government officials) will go on to reach thousands of people all over Australia.

In the aisle seat, the fit-looking passenger next to me stands up to pull his phone from his backpack in the overhead lockers, snapping me out of my thoughts. When he sits down, I introduce myself and the man tells me his name is James and that he works for Border Force on the ship that patrols the water around the islands. James tells me he works three weeks on and one week off and is heading back to Perth while he is on leave. I concentrate on making my face look neutral, my mind starts to whir. I can't quite believe my good fortune. I wait for James to put his seatbelt on and settle back in his seat. I glance casually at my phone and then out the window. I have a million questions for the man strapped into the seat next to me, and all either one of us has for the next three hours, is time.

Figure 1: Brown booby, Margaret Knoll.

Conclusion: The Archipelago of Us

I returned to Fremantle from the Indian Ocean Territories with a suitcase full of stories. They whisper from my digital recorder, sit as stacks of words in fat files, steep each cell in my body, each person's pared-back truth a shimmering thing, precious, tenuous and ever-shifting. These stories give me hope. In these stories I find generosity, openness, fluidity and possibility, courage, honesty and acceptance. In many of the encounters with people who shared their lives with me in the Indian Ocean Territories, I see a country I can believe in, an expression of the best notions of our nation—an idea of Australia that can both embrace and define, as well as invite.

Author Deborah Bird Rose tells us that stories arising from true dialogue between ourselves and others is a form of ethical practice. Like Gibson, she asks for a new way of listening that is attentive to the human and non-human, a listening that can extend to the place itself. In 'Slowly–Writing into the Anthropocene', Bird Rose argues that these encounters with one another are the antidote to the 'unmaking' all around us, the fragmentation and disconnection that results from the 'decontextualising cosmology' of modernity, a worldview in which all elements are seen as separate and discrete, cutting us off from each other and the living world that would sustain us.

Like Bird Rose, I have experienced each story shared as an act of resistance, pushing back against the perceived border between self and other, a moral distancing that has often resulted in our ethical paralysis—a paralysis that largely continues in our country, even in the face of our current ecological and refugee crisis. To enter into dialogue, into story, is to acknowledge the 'necessary entanglement' of our lives with the lives of others and the earth itself. To enter deeply and fully into another's narrative in the 'slow ethics of encounter' is to be open and opened, to be vulnerable, to become responsible, to allow ourselves to be changed.

And I am changed. I am changed not only by the people I met, but by the islands themselves. There has been an exchange, a form of dialogue, in which I have

learnt to listen deeply to this world of flux and fluidity, a process akin to a slow erosion that has blurred my own borders, allowing me to inhabit a far more expansive idea of identity and Country.

The influence of the two very different island-scapes of Christmas Island and the Cocos (Keeling) Islands has been as unique as the islands themselves. While working with refugees on Christmas Island, my experiences of the insularity of islands was simultaneously re-enforced and undermined. Christmas Island, a singular submarine mountain that thrusts three hundred and sixty metres above the ocean, seemed to demonstrably support the idea of islands as discrete entities. Yet Christmas Island's very existence (as an Australian landmass disconnected from the apparently unitary island body of Australia) ostensively undermined my belief in my nation's insularity, while the lethal ramifications of an insular position expressed itself in increasingly shocking ways, such as the growing number of asylum seekers dying at sea or self-harming within detention centres.

When I moved to the Cocos (Keeling) Islands in 2012, my belief in the insularity of any island was completely challenged by my experiences of place on a daily basis. With large, fluctuating tides, all day the island's landmass would retract and expand. Conventionally we understand islands to be tracts of land completely surrounded by water, yet in the atoll's lagoon (formed by twenty-four islets' in a horseshoe formation), it became unclear what fitted the definition of 'island' and what was sea, as the sea floor would repeatedly rise in bumps and ripples above the ocean's thin film of water at low tide. After a cyclone, I woke to find a place where I used to sit and read several metres inland had completely disappeared, while some of the smaller 'islands' came and went over time or within a week in response to oceanic surges. I would look at tourist maps of the island and wonder who had decided where the 'edge' was and whether it had changed by the time the map went to print.

Living in such a changeable topography made me realise how much my life was vulnerable to, and therefore inseparable from, the physical environment around me. As the boundaries between land and sea broke down, so too did my experiences of self and 'other', the 'other' of place, of the non-human natural

world, as well as people. This experience changed my life in the most fundamental sense.

When I first discovered the work of other island writers in the field of tidalectics, I was both inspired and relieved. Suddenly I found there was a whole genre of thinkers, predominantly Caribbean, who shared my experience of fluidity, both in their reflections on the 'landscape' and the conception of the relationship between place and self. The term 'tidalectics' was first coined by the late Kamau Brathwaite[28], but has been expanded upon by theorists such as Elizabeth Deloughrey and Edouard Glissant, using the motion of the sea as a way of explaining 'an alternative model of space and time, a "tidalectic" between past and present, land and sea, the local and the global'. Ultimately tidalectics is a shift away from a traditional dualistic lens to instead understanding the world as inherently reciprocal, fluid and dynamic.

My first sense that many islanders have a fundamentally different way of experiencing the world came about when Maria Tiimon, a Pacific Islander living in Sydney, came to the Cocos (Keeling) Islands to promote the documentary film 'The Hungry Tide'. Watching the film Tiimon made with producer and director Tom Zubrycki, as well as listening to Tiimon speak, I experienced the ways in which Tiimon's tenuous and changeable home on the island of Kiribati resonated with the vulnerable and shifting world of flux where I now found myself living.

Zubrycki's film led me to the work of Amitav Ghosh, in particular, to the novel *The Hungry Tide*, a work that the film was presumably inspired by. Ghosh's novel is set in the immense archipelago of islands known as the Indian Sundarbans located in the Bay of Bengal. The fluid and ever-shifting nature of the Sundarbans pushes back against any set delineations, a terrain 'midwived by the moon':

> Until you behold it for yourself, it is almost impossible to believe that here, interposed between sea and the plains of Bengal, lies an

[28] Brathwaite was one of the founders of the Caribbean Artists Movement, as well as the author of numerous collections of poetry, including *Elegguas* (2010) and the Griffin International Poetry Prize winner, *Slow Horses* (2005). Brathwaite was also the author of *Our Ancestral Heritage: A Bibliography of the Roots of Culture in the English-speaking Caribbean* (1976) and *Barbados Poetry: A Checklist: Slavery to the Present* (1979).

> immense archipelago of islands. But that is what it is: an archipelago stretching for almost three hundred kilometres, from the Hooghly River in West Bengal to the shores of Meghna in Bangladesh…The river's channels are spread across the land like a fine-mesh net, creating a terrain where the boundaries between land and water are always mutating, always unpredictable… every day thousands of acres of forest disappear underwater, only to re-emerge hours later. The currents are so powerful as to reshape the islands almost daily — some days the water tears away entire promontories and peninsulas; at other times it throws up new shelves and sandbanks where there were none before.

My amazement at the tidalectic connection between the seemingly disparate worlds of the Sundarbans and the Cocos (Keeling) Islands only increased over the course of the novel, as the fate of the Dalit refugees in West Bengal's island of Marichjhapi in the late 1970s, is revealed through the journal entries of Kanai's deceased uncle. Here the novel alludes to an historical connection between marginal spaces and marginalised people highly relevant to the Indian Ocean Territories. Yet even the uncle's historical record reveals itself as tenuous, as his manuscript itself is claimed by the surge of the *bhati* — the Sundarban's tide.

In *Australia and the Insular Imagination*, Suvendrini Perera is similarly inspired by island writers who use the recursive rhythm of the ocean as lens. Perera argues that tidalectics is important in helping us to frame the present in 'global, transoceanic and transregional terms', a place where the sea maintains its history as a site of interconnection, commonality and mutuality rather than a border zone of hostility and exclusivity. In a recent edition of *Shima* journal, Gómez-Barris and Joseph also overtly address the way in which 'archipelagos challenge continental thinking', inviting different spatialities and frameworks that directly challenge colonial discourses. This oceanic imaginary emphasises 'a trans-oceanic connectivity of decolonial processes that demand a move away from a nationally driven articulation of belonging and history towards a more interwoven, matrixed network of coastal societies and their colonial histories.'

Intrigued by this new 'oceanic imaginary', while living on the Cocos (Keeling) Islands I began to explore the work of other authors who inhabited small islands, atolls and archipelagos. I began reading the work of Fijian writer Epili Hau'ofa, who refers to his home as a 'sea of islands', and Antonio Benitez Rojo, who uses the analogy of the Milky Way to describe the Caribbean islands. The work of these writers began to change the way in which I viewed my new home. I began to even rethink using the term 'landscape' to describe place, the term containing an inherent terrestrial bias central to an insular perspective that prioritises land over sea. I gained a growing awareness that I experienced the smaller islands of the Cocos (Keeling) Islands as larger than their bigger brother, Christmas Island, nine hundred and sixty kilometres away. This was due to the fact that islanders experienced the lagoon as part of the atoll as we spent our time diving, paddling, sailing and swimming, our lives lived half in and half out of the water. Our sense of place was not reduced to the atoll's landmass. For cultures who have lived between sea and land for centuries, this conceptualisation of space is not a theoretical matter, but pragmatically informs daily life and spiritual belief systems.

April Shemak's work *Asylum Speakers: Carribbean Refugees and Testimonial Discourse* draws on the writings of tidalectic writers such as Glissant, Walcott and Benitez-Rojo as she explores the implications of a tidalectic perspective in her analysis of refugee discourses. As the title indicates, Shemak considers 'how refugee testimonial discourse functions as a political ritual situated on the periphery of citizenship and…as a precursor to political membership'. Within this larger theme, Shemak analyses the sea as 'a central site of travel and limbo existence' and the way in which current refugee movements are linked to a history of movement and migration in the Caribbean, giving rise to considerations of transnationalism. Yet Shemak also marks the limits of this application as the growing surveillance of oceanic spaces increasingly defines the sea as a place of immobility, containment and control.

Tidalectics also has significant implications for our conceptualisation of our insular nation. If we apply this less binary view of place to our understanding of 'Australia', we come to see our country not only as its continental landmass, but also the watery world of atolls, reefs and the shifting sea between. According to this

view, we simply cannot be reduced to 'Island Australia', but if we are not 'Island Australia', then who are we? Asking myself this question feels like opening a door in a windowless room, a rush of new air spilling in to every corner. If we could allow a more porous notion of our borders, who could we, collectively, become? I like to imagine the 'Archipelago of Us'—in such a conception there is still a place you can name in which to belong, yet this very definition allows complexity, fluidity and multiplicity.

My stories have gifted me a map, a winding way back to a place that I loved, recast and reinvented. But I am unsure whether they can return me to my belief in a 'Fair Go' nation.[29] I think back to the beginning of this journey, to the playful students I met in the tiny community outside of Fitzroy Crossing. I think about the children's hunger, their classmate on suicide watch whose brother had hung himself with the inner-tube of a tyre, this story part of a far bigger narrative about our country's ongoing failure to 'Close the Gap' in the life expectancy and standard of living for the first Australians.

I consider the lack of wage parity for Asian Australians on Christmas Island mining phosphate for Australian farmers, the apartheid system that Pete had to endure in that same community even into the late 1970s, the consequences of the White Australia policy for him and so many other non-white citizens both on Christmas Island as well as the mainland, the legislative sanctioning of prejudice in the hearts and minds of the Australian populace.

I turn over my own stories, the lives that found their way into mine in this excised world: the children locked in detention without so much as a playground, their slow forgetting of how to laugh and play. I think of Zainal's heartbreak, the seeming failure of our Navy to protect those aboard the *Janga*, the exclusion of families from the memorial for those who suffered such violent deaths, even when the memorial service was about their own loved ones. I think of Massom, hand held to the flow of the waterfall, those same hands later lifting cleaning fluids into to his lips as he was robbed of is hope by a cruel regime of incarceration and punishment

[29] For an example of the way in which ideas of 'Fair Go' Australia have been both harnessed and abandoned in recent Australian politics, see: https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2018/jan/28/what-happened-to-the-fair-go-liberals-propaganda-arm-silent-since-august

for those who fled to our country seeking safety. And I think of Nek Su, his courage and overcoming of his severely limiting circumstances, our country's failure to ensure his education, health and basic freedoms. I consider the excision of the entire Indian Ocean region to avoid our obligations under the Refugee Convention, the way we have both legally and emotionally cut ourselves off from our 'badlands', even when these places are at our nation's centre, even if it has meant cutting ourselves off from our own red heart.

Three years after my return to the islands, my stories become a series of waves, a rolling tide that requires a form of relenting, delivering me a sense of slow shock and an unfolding grief. Even in their diversity, these stories point to the common understanding that our present hostilities are not an aberration. I can see no time since that fateful day in 1770, when Captain Cook placed one well-heeled foot upon this continent's shore, when Australia was truly egalitarian. I can't find my way back to my 'Fair Go' nation because my 'Fair Go' nation never existed. 'Fair Go' Australia is a myth.

These words smart like a wound, this is not the answer I was expecting to find, but this is the place where I have arrived. Yet something in me rises up, won't let this ideal go, still thinks this idea of our country is worth holding onto. Gibson tells us our myths can inform us if we are willing to learn from them, if we can see them for what they are. Perhaps if we could see our 'Fair Go' nation not just as a fiction, but as an aspiration, a guiding story telling us who we want to be, its ideal could still be useful.

Through my research in response to my interview with Pete Ch'ng, I learnt that, ironically, it was in 1901, in the articulation of the White Australia policy, that our 'Fair Go' aspirations were first clearly articulated as part of our national identity. Our 'Fair Go' Nation was borne of negation, directly in opposition to the 'other'. The National Museum of Australia describes the conceptualisation of the White Australia policy in the following way:

> Australia saw itself as a utopia and a working man's paradise, a forward-thinking country that promoted equal rights and opportunities, for 'desirable' citizens at least. The nation aimed to attract a well-paid, male, white and

skilled labour force to uphold this image. Non-whites, and even sometimes working women, were seen as a threat to this ideal.

Our country has rallied around the idea of a 'Fair Go' nation since Federation, but for whom exactly did white Australia will this 'Fair Go'?

The racist and fear-based nature of the White Australia policy is examined by Ghassan Hage in *Against a Paranoid Nationalism: Searching for Hope in a Shrinking Society*. Hage's central premise is that humans are a species of hoping subjects, and that societies are responsible for the circulation of hope amongst their citizens. Hage argues that the White Australia policy was borne of a fear that 'whiteness was under threat', along with the hopes and privileges believed to go with this social status. Hage goes on to say that the White Australia policy, '…basically meant having a domestic policy geared toward the continuing extermination of the culture of the colonised Indigenous people and an immigration policy geared toward excluding non-whites from Australia and from Australian citizenship.'

What is interesting about Hage's take on the defence of the Australian way of life through the enactment of the White Australia policy is that he reveals the construction of whiteness to be a reasonably recent cultural phenomenon, a new 'historical category' emerging from the rise of European colonialism. In John Biewen's series *How Race was Made (Seeing White),* he explores the way in which 'race' is an anthropological fiction that has become a reality due to the construct's political and social consequences. Exploring the history of race, Biewen, in conversation with award-winning author and historian Ibram Kendi, discusses how the Ancient Greeks considered themselves as superior to other civilizations, yet the Greeks considered both Persians and Ethiopians as equally barbaric. 'Blackness' first appeared as a construct through the justifications of the slave trade in the 1400s, whereas 'Caucasian' was not introduced as an ideal until the late 1700s. Through a gradual historical shift, the working classes in Europe in the early 1900s were no longer being continually framed as inferior. Instead, through their identification with a whiteness as an inherently 'superior' identity, working class people were given 'access to humanity and to "dignity and hope" within the nation.'

Hage argues that we form a connection with our country through either a participatory culture of care (i.e., I am cared for by my country and therefore I care for others who are part of my country) or through a more paranoid means of identification, that of worrying (I am unsure if my country will care for me, there may not be enough care to go around, therefore others are a threat to my share of being cared for). According to Hage, the 'white worrier' is a particularly enhanced expression of the worrying citizen, especially if whiteness has not delivered in the way it had promised, and an individual has felt unable to transcend the limits of class. In Hage's words:

> …this is…where white anxiety emerged…At the basis of this anxiety is the simple fact that…some Europeans were capable of living up to the 'civilized ideals' of white Europeanness with greater success than others…Whiteness was the means of accessing the ideal, but it gave no promise of achieving total identification with it. It only meant one could hope and aspire toward such an ideal…it was often the promise of a 'better life' without that actual better life ever materialising. So the working classes were the ones who most needed the reinforcement of hope provided by colonial racism.

The limits of Hage's approach is he does not overtly address why 'paranoid nationalism'[30] is still overtly expressed by those who do enjoy the abundant fruits of their whiteness and may feel they have been given a 'Fair Go', transcending the limits of class. But we can infer the reasons by making a link with a greater anxiety Hage refers to, an anxiety derived from people's experience of fragility inherent in the act of colonisation. Hage asserts that in Australia the colonial act is never fully realised as the legacy of our genocidal past continues to haunt us, and the inherent wildness of our enormous continent (and its 'archipelagic' surrounds), so far from the motherland, exerts its will in ways that humbles our own.

[30] Hage defines the 'paranoia' of the national subject as 'a pathological form of fear based on a conception of the self as excessively fragile and constantly threatened…The core element of Australia's cultural paranoia is a fear of a loss of Europeanness or whiteness and of the lifestyle and privileges that are seen to emanate directly from that.'

Here Hage has interesting links with Gibson's work, not only in the way our wild spaces directly confound our ability to believe white Australia has once and for all asserted its colonial will over the 'landscape', but also because both authors describe Australia as 'haunted.' Gibson and Hage describe an anxious country deeply unsettled by the ghosts of its murderous past, a nation still unable to collectively admit that as white Australians, we live on stolen land, forcefully taken by pale-skinned immigrants on boats that came uninvited over the border. It is the playing out of this haunting I witnessed on Christmas Island as the shadowy figures of Navy and Border Force commodes appeared and disappeared like apparitions at the edges of the nation, the act of an anxious coloniser afraid of invasion by the 'other', scribing and reinscribing a white line in an ever-shifting sea.

For Hage, the antidote to anxiety about the 'other', is a commitment to care. When we care we create a sense of abundance: I give to you, you give to me—in this act of trust and investment we experience there is more than enough to go around. In the act of caring, of giving and receiving, we build our sense of our responsibility, not just to one another, but to our role in the larger narrative of a nation. I care about my nation, so I care about its story, I am invested in its history.

Hage was inspired by Gatens and Lloyd who, drawing on Spinoza's idea of 'the imaginary', ask for a more expansive conception of the individual within which our connection to the violent acts of the past might make more sense. Gatens and Lloyd write:

> Our understanding of responsibility is restrained by thinking of individuals as bordered territories, firmly separated from others in such a way that the issue of where responsibility lies is always in principle determinable. Spinoza's treatment of individuality—especially that aspect of it which Balibar terms 'transindividuality'—gives an insight into the nexus between individual and collective identity…It can help us in understanding something which otherwise…can seem puzzling and inappropriate: that individuals can take responsibility for what they themselves have not done.

Again we witness notions of fluidity lapping at the edges of insularity, this time at the discrete image of the individual, of self as 'island'. If I am not separate from you, or from the people who have come before me (or those who come after), then the story of what has happened in my country (and what will happen in the future) becomes part of my own. Hage summarises our responsibility within such a configuration of the self through the eloquent words of Ross Poole,

> A national identity involves, not just a sense of place, but a sense of history. The history constitutes the national memory, it provides a way of locating those who share that identity within a historical community…Acquiring a national identity is a way of acquiring that history and the rights and responsibilities that go with it. The responsibility to come to terms with the Australian past is a morally inescapable component of what it means to be Australian.

I believe Poole and Hage, and Gatens and Lloyd, as well as Gibson and Bird Rose (through her 'slow ethics of encounter'), are all inviting Australians into a world of courageous responsibility. For me, the stories unearthed in this thesis reveal my nation is (to return to Gibson's quote) 'disturbing enough—and beautiful enough' to spur me into wanting to rise to my feet in response. Can we as a country be courageous enough to stretch our definition of 'Australian' to become more supple, more bountiful and open? Can white Australians collectively show a willingness to finally turn and fully face the violence with which the nation was forged? If citizens could dig deep to find this less fearful version of who we are as people, as a society, perhaps the idea of a 'Fair Go' Australia could finally guide us—perhaps it is precisely what we need.

Figure 2: Cocos Malay women relaxing at a pondok on Pulu Cheplok.

Figure 3: Mating crickets in Chinese Graveyard, Christmas Island.

Appendices

Appendix 1: Interviewee Information Sheet and Consent Forms

Blurring at our Borders; Subjectivity and Place in Australian Topographies

INFORMATION SHEET

I am writing to invite you take part in an interview as part of my doctoral research project. This research is funded by Curtin University and is carried out by Renee Schipp in the School of Media, Culture and the Creative Arts at Curtin University of Technology in Perth, Australia.

The aim of the research is to explore the similarities and differences in the way people experience terrestrial and fluvial landscapes in various sites throughout Western Australia. For example, how might residents of the Cocos (Keeling) Islands and Fitzroy Crossing experience these spaces similarly due to their remote location, and differently, due to the different way water is present in these areas?
The project is a comparative one that is being carried out in five different locations throughout Western Australia that the PhD candidate has lived in at some time. The interviews will be used by the PhD candidate to produce a series of creative essays about the way Western Australians experience place, that with the ultimate intention of producing a book for publication.

We are inviting you to contribute in this project due to the time you have spent living in one of these locations, as well as your specific experiences …

Your participation will be extremely valuable for the research, but it is your choice whether or not you would like to be involved. If you agree, we would ask you to spare approximately 2 hours of time for discussion with the PhD candidate.

During the discussion, if you are uncomfortable you can stop the conversation at any time, or you can tell the PhD candidate if you would prefer not to talk about certain matters. You can also ask that something you mentioned previously be removed from the record or for your contribution to be considered off the record. You have the option to withdraw from the project altogether before, during, or within four weeks after

the interview. If you decide to withdraw from the process, your data will be deleted from the Research Drive.

All the discussions will be recorded for accuracy, and we can send you a typed copy if you would like to keep it. The material in the discussion will be used in the writing of poetry and lyric/academic essays. It is up to you whether you would like to be named in the work as one of the people who contributed. If you prefer, your contribution can be listed as anonymous. Otherwise a list of people put with together with place and date may appear in a publication associated with the research.

The transcribed record of the discussion as well as all the audio file will be stored on the Research Drive at Curtin University. If you would like your audio file and transcript to be destroyed at the end of the research you can let the PhD candidate know. Curtin University Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) has approved this study (HREC number PERERS-HU01170). Should you wish to discuss the study with someone not directly involved, in particular, any matters concerning the conduct of the study or your rights as a participant, or you wish to make a confidential complaint, you may contact the Ethics Officer on (08) 9266 9223 or the Manager, Research Integrity on (08) 9266 7093 or email hrec@curtin.edu.au.

Thank you for your participation in this research. It is hoped that the work that results from our collaboration will add to wider understandings about the complex place that is Australia, as well as the rich diversity of our country's landscapes and people. It would be an honour to have you included as a part of this project.

Kind regards

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Blurring at our Borders; Subjectivity and Place in Australian Topographies

CONSENT SHEET

(To be presented at meeting)

This research is funded by the Curtin University and is carried out by Ms Renee Schipp in the School of Media, Communication and Cultural Studies at Curtin University in Perth, Australia.

I would like to receive a copy of the typed transcript:

YES NO

I would like my name and the place and date of this discussion to be acknowledged in published sources:

YES NO

I would like my transcript and recording to be destroyed at the end of the project:

YES NO

- I have read, *{or had read to me in my first language}*, the information listed above and I understand its contents.
- I believe I understand the purpose, extent and possible risks of my involvement in this project.
- I voluntarily consent to take part in this research project.
- I have had an opportunity to ask questions and I am satisfied with the answers I have received.
- I understand that this project has been approved by Curtin University Human Research Ethics Committee and will be carried out in line with the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2007) – updated March 2014.
- I understand I will receive a copy of this Information Statement and Consent Form.

Participant Name	
Participant Signature	
Date	

Appendix 2: Key Questions asked of Research Participants

1. How did you come to be living in the islands?
2. What do you value most about your life here?
3. What is the biggest challenge?
4. How does the presence of so much ocean affect the way you see your life?
5. Do you see yourself as primarily as an Australian or as a Christmas/Cocos Islander?
6. How does your role in the community affect the way you see the islands?
7. If you could change one thing about the islands what would it be?
8. What do you hope for the future of the islands?
9. Do you think you will always live here?

Appendix 3: Forgotten Children Report Submission

Most children had no access to any playground equipment in the Detention Centres where they were detained. Some of the compounds overlooked island playground facilities, but the asylum seeker children were prevented from accessing this playground. One of the things that struck me about how cruel this was, was to see those children who did get to go to school spend their whole lunch time queuing to have a go on the swing, only to be thwarted by some of the mainstream children who enacted the prejudices they were hearing from home.

The Detention Centres had no trees or life, it was dust and grey slab paving everywhere which in the wet would turn to mud. In the wet season at the Phosphate Hill detention facility, as it was at such a high point on the Island, often it was difficult to see more than a few metres in front of you due to the mist that surrounded the centre. The family compound is also next to the rubbish tip. Once the whole centre had to be evacuated due to toxic fumes coming from the tip.

I tried to do things with the children to bring life to the facilities, but I felt these efforts were deliberately sabotaged due to a punitive culture amongst the staff at the Detention Centre. For example, the students and I made a giant banner of all the children from my class and our mainstream buddy class holding hands in a big heart shape to put up in the dining hall. When I took this to the Detention Centre the Serco guards would not let me put it up, they said the Recreation Officer had to do it. I left the mural with them and they threw it in the bin.

The punitive culture was also applied to staff who cared about asylum seekers. Once while I was waiting for an asylum seeker student to finish his shower so I could take him to the beach, a family asked me to have a cup of tea with them. I had never been told not to enter the rooms of asylum seekers, so I agreed. It was a very special and strangely normal experience sitting with the parents of my students drinking tea in their 'home'. The next time I came to see the student I was treated like a criminal. I was told to stand in front of a Serco officer and not to the leave the place where I was standing. The student was then brought to me and we had to

have our conversation in front of the guards and then I was escorted out of the facility.

Another example of the punitive attitudes that affected asylum seeker children in detention was that around the time of the riots at North West Point, the children were given chocolate cake to go with their lunches. Members of the community complained to the Department of Immigration as they felt the students were not entitled to the cake, so the students stopped receiving treats with their lunch.

We continue to transfer children randomly and without due consideration of their circumstances and employ people who look after them on short term contracts, the huge turnover of staff making it very hard for people who work with asylum seekers to form relationships with these vulnerable children or liaise with others to meet their needs. Even taking children on excursions out of detention was very difficult as the process was laborious and the administration one had to go through kept changing. This seemed a deliberate ploy to distance people working with asylum seekers from the asylum seekers themselves, even when those asylum seekers were children.

Sources of Facts and Quotations

Introduction

page 1 — Shared 'voyage of discovery' from Gornick (2002) p. 14.

page 1–2 — Quote, 'The poet, the novelist, the memoirist—all must convince the reader…' from ibid p. 14.

page 2 — The definition of the 'situation' and the 'story' from Gornick (2002) p. 13.

page 2 — Quote by McInerney, 'the [story] that belongs to history…' as cited in Malouf (2014) p. 4.

page 2 — Quote, 'Penetrating the familiar is by no means given…' from Gornick (2002) p. 9.

page 2 — Reference to 'transcendent coping' from Pipher (2013) p. 4.

page 3 — Quote defining Practice-led research as a 'prolonged engagement with a specific research question' that is often 'experiential, qualitative and non-quantifiable' as well as reference to practice-led research being often the only methodology available to answer certain research questions, from Green (2007) pp. 1–2.

page 3 — The quote, 'an interactive cycle and web', referring to the relationship between practice-led research and research-led practice, from Smith and Dean (2009) p. 2.

page 4 — Tidalectics as an alternative model of time and space from DeLoughrey (2011) p. 803.

page 4 — Tidalectics defined as 'trans-oceanic connectivity' from Gomez and Joseph (2019) p. 1.

page 4 — The quote asserting academic knowledge is still constructed along 'familiar binaries such as rational/irrational, objective/subjective, and masculine/feminine' from Robertson and Pettitt-Schipp (et al.) (2017) p. 5.

page 4 — The emphasis on reciprocity, relationality and mutuality from Bird Rose (2013) pp. 3–7.

page 7 — Quote regarding 'embodied encounters' from ibid p. 8.

page 7 — Quote, ‘slow is a movement toward quality over quantity, connection rather than fragmentation, and toward ethical mutualities rather than self-interest alone…a movement toward thought and attention’ from Bird Rose (2013) pp. 6–7.

Christmas Island (Prologue)

page 11 — Atwood quote sourced from Smith (2010) pp. 36–37.

page 11 — Paley quote sourced from Dee, J. (et al.) (1992).

Trees Honour the Company they Keep

page 20 — ‘Incarceration rates for aboriginal children’ sourced from Owen (2016) p. 455.

page 21 — Reference to ‘polluting memories’ and ‘participatory belonging’ in Hage (2003) pp. 97–99.

page 22 — The quote ‘implicated subjects’, people who ‘occupy positions of power and privilege without being…direct agents of harm.’ from Rothberg (2019) pii.

page 23 — ‘Between 1918 and 1945, Japan purchased around seventy-five to eighty percent of Christmas Island’s phosphate’ sourced from Hunt (2011) p. 167.

page 23 — World War Two facts drawn from ibid pp. 117, 187, 189, 196, 197, 198.

page 25 — Census information drawn from Australian Bureau of Statistics (2017).

page 26 — The reference to the ‘hundred and twenty Chinese men’ landing in 1899 from the provinces of the provinces of ‘Kwangtung (Guangdong), Kwangsi (Guangxi) and Fukien (Fujian) as well as —Hainan’, sourced from Hunt (2011) p. 1.

page 26 — Translation of Coolies memorial as cited in Bartleson (2008) p. 50.

page 28 — Information about Gordon Bennett’s history and legacy, including the BPC rate of pay of $55 a week, sourced from Kelley, M. (et al.) (1999).

page 29 — Plaque quote sourced from Kile (2013).

page 29 — Wage statistics during the 1970s sourced from Reserve Bank, 1996.

page 30 — The metaphoric role of birds ‘bridging the deceased…back to their homeland’ is drawn from Bartleson (2008) p. 27.

page 30 — Facts about the Christmas Island frigatebird sourced from *Islander Explorer Holidays* (2008) p. 11 and Gray (1995) p. 97.

Our Tenuous Place

page 33 — Early images of Christmas Island sourced from Neale (1988) and Hunt (2011).

page 35 — The Christmas Island boat tragedy cited as 'the worst disaster in more than a century in Australia's maritime history' sourced from Doherty (2016).

Remembering

page 42–43 — 'In a single day [the British appointed District Officer] might act as a judge…' sourced from Tierney (2007) p. 27.

page 45 — Christmas Island boat tragedy links from Perpitch, N. and Barrass, T. (et al) (Updated 2012) and Drew (2010).

Pete Parts the Wild Horse's Mane

page 52–53 — References to the Border Force Act as well as links cited from 'What are the secrecy provisions,' (2016) and *Australian Border Force Act (2015)*.

page 55 — The quote 'one of the most shameful in recent history, with a virtual system of apartheid operating as late as the 1970s' sourced from Kelley, M. (et al.) (1999).

page 57 —The quote, 'Australia's historically favourite "other" has always been "the Asians." The White Australia policy was designed with Asians in mind.' from Hage (2003) p. 67.

page 58 — Reference to the White Australia Policy as being one of the 'founding pieces of legislation introduced to the newly formed parliament on the twenty-third of December 1901' from National Museum of Australia (no date).

page 58 — Reference to Australia as a 'working man's paradise' sourced from ibid.

page 61 — Yang's description of himself as 'coming out' as Chinese sourced from Grehan and Scheer (2016) p. 125.

page 61-62 — Yang quote from Perth Festival (2018).

page 62 — Yang quote, ‘I had to make a huge adjustment, from coming behind the camera as a photographer, to metaphorically standing in front of the camera. I didn’t find it easy…’, as well as Yang’s concession that his performances are the most consummate expressions of his creative process, from Perth Festival (2018).

page 62–63 — The Yang quote from cursive script over layered over an image refers to Yang’s work *Self Portrait #2* in Grehan and Scheer (2016) p. 28.

page 63 — The ‘productive gap’ is a term used by Grehan and Scheer (2016) p. 17.

page 63 — Kaja Silverman quote from Grehan and Schooer (2016) p. 169.

A Door in My Ribs

page 69 — Names of asylum seekers who drowned aboard the SIEV sourced from Mahood (2002).

Hand Held to the Flow

page 71 — Facts on land crabs from Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Cities and Regional Development (2014).

page 72 — The statistic of twelve attempted suicides a day in Christmas Island’s Immigration Detention Centre sourced from Iggulden (2011).

The Wild Air

page 88 — Quote in footnote from Hage (2003) pp. 116–117.

Why He Stays

page 94 — Information on the landslides and ‘Edinburgh settlement’ (including the reference to amahs teaching white children Malay) sourced from Hunt (2011) pp. 116, 155.

Walking Backward Toward Light

page 102 — Nauru Files sourced from Farrel, D. (et al.) (2016)

page 103 — *The Forgotten Children Report* from Australian Human Rights Commission (2015).

page 112 — References to the *Thonglines* project from Bannister (2011).

An Island of Hungry Ghosts

page 119 — Information on the Festival of the Hungry Ghost sourced from the chapter, 'Pudu: The Hungry Ghost Festival' in Tan (2018) pp. 83–95.

page 120 — Facts about deaths in detention from Monash University (no date).

page 121 — Quote from *Island of the Hungry Ghosts* sourced from Brady (2019).

My Island Home

page 134 — Quote 'intimate cultural relationships with the land and the sea' in footnote and map reference from AIATSIS 2020.

page 134 — Winton (2015) quote pp. 9, 10.

page 135 — The reference to 'Island Australia' as a 'master metaphor' from Perera (2009) p. 21.

page 135 — Jacqueline Rose (2011) quote p. 126.

page 135 — Elizabeth McMahon (2013) quote p. 56.

page 135 — Line from song, 'We are one, but we are many from Newton and Woodley (1987).

page 136 — Austin and Fozdar's discussion of Australian ideals of a 'Fair Go' and the deterioration of the role of the nation state in (2018) pp. 245–265.

page 136 —The chapter, 'Transcendental capitalism and the shrinking configuration of hope', and the term 'hope scarcity' from Hage (2003) pp. 18–20.

page 136 — Analysis of the Christmas Island boat tragedy from Flanagan (2010).

page 137-138 — Warren Snowden quote from Christmas Island Shire (2011) p. 6.

page 138 — Introduction of the term 'Border Force' from Lowy Institute (2014).

page 139 — Quote from Zainal's speech from Joint Select Committee in the Christmas Island Tragedy, Shire of Christmas Island (2011) p. 7.

page 139 — Quote from the Department of Immigration and Citizenship records sourced from ibid p. 3.

page 140 — Doka's term 'disenfranchised grief sourced from Yalom, 2010.

page 140 — quote from Larsson (2009) p. 82.

page 141 — 'Residents on the Island who witnessed the incident tried to save us throwing life jackets and ropes. And so did the Navy and Police.' Quote from translated letter, unnamed asylum seeker, Shire of Christmas Island (2011) p. 3.
page 142 — For class action reference see 'Christmas Island survivor slams rescue operation' (2011).
page 142 — For reference to Australia's seeming culpability in the loss of lives for those aboard the SIEV X, see Hutton (2011).
page 143 — Ramin's quote from Shire of Christmas Island (2011) p. 7.
page 144 — Excision legislation sourced from Commonwealth of Australia (2001).
page 144 — Quote from Perera (2009) p. 4.
page 144 — The quote, 'The Australian social and political reality (or lack of it) created by the rule of John Howard's Liberal National Party.' from Hage (2003) p. 1.
page 144 — The reference to 'White colonial paranoia' and the idea of 'changing back' from ibid pp. 4, 48, 65.
page 145 — The reference to Howard giving orders 'for Australian troops to join America in the war in Iraq and Afghanistan' from National Museum of Australia (no date).
Page 145 — John Howard's quote, 'we will decide who comes into this country and the circumstances in which they come' from Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet (2001).
page 146 — Quote from Gibson (2002) p. 173.
page 146 — Quote 'expectations, actions and reactions' ibid, p. 50.
page 147 — Quote 'History is stories making facts happen…' ibid, p. 50.
page 147 — 'Native Mounted Police' facts sourced from Gibson (2002) p. 57.
page 147 — Settlement claim payout sourced from 'Queensland Government to pay $190 million settlement over unpaid wages' (2019).
page 147 — Reference to guano mining in the Kimberley and violence as 'the exception rather than the norm' in Owen (2016) pp. 6, 9.
page 148 — The phrase the 'violent logic of the border' is a quote from Perera (2009) p. 102.
page 148 —The quote, 'These colonists came from colonies where pastoralists openly killed Aboriginal people on their 'runs'…' from Owen (2016) p. 9.

page 148 — ‘Kartiya’ or ‘The Killing Times’ from ibid p. 32.

page 148 — The reference to ‘twenty-seven different tribal groups representing between ten thousand to thirty thousand people (a quarter of the total number of Aboriginal people in Western Australia) were reduced to ‘approximately’ five thousand in less than two decades’ from ibid pp. 5, 6.

page 148 — Reference to ‘confrontation, incarceration and assimilation’ as well as summary of article from Kerr and Cox (2016) p. 17.

page 149 — Reference to ‘unsettling’ in Moreton-Robinson (2015) pxxi.

page 149 — the Quote ‘…invest in reproducing and reaffirming the nation-state’s ownership…’ from ibid pxii.

page 149 — Refusal to acknowledge Indigenous sovereignty in ibid p172.

page 149 — ‘Discourse of security’ in Moreton-Robinson (2015) p139 and the reference to ‘racially-based and performative acts such as Howard’s closure of the Office of Multiculturalism, the suspension of the Racial Discrimination Act during the Intervention, as well as the amendment of Native Title legislation’ from ibid pp20,21.

page 149 — The ‘logic of capital’ from ibid p52.

page 149 — The reference to Indigenous ownership as ‘corporeal and symbiotic’ from ibid p84.

Page 149 — The pathologising of Indigenous people from Moreton-Robinson (2015) p164.

Page 149 — The ‘enemy within’ from ibid p140.

page 150 — Quote, ‘I’ve found this place never stops teaching by surprising and disturbing…’ sourced from Gibson (2011) pp. 2–3.

Cocos (Keeling) Islands

page 153 — Quote from de Certeau (1988) p. 129.

West Island (Pulu Panjang)

page 159 — Poem *Pinggiran* from Pettitt-Schipp (2014) p. 224.

The End of the Line

page 164 — Clunies-Ross (2009)

page 165 — reference to John Clunies-Ross on social media sourced from John George Clunies Ross (2016)

page 166 — Reference to 'the original John Clunies-Ross was born in 1786 on the Shetland Islands' from Clunies-Ross (2009) p. 10.

page 166 — The 'labour force of illegally kept slaves predominantly from Malaysia, but also Indonesia, China, Papua, Africa and India' sourced from Bunce, 1988, pp. 36–43.

page 166 — The history of the relationship between Hare and Clunies-Ross sourced from ibid pp. 13–28.

page 172 — The reference to every Cocos-Malay woman being required to serve an 'apprenticeship' in the Clunies-Ross household, sourced from Clunies-Ross (2009) p. 64.

Quarantine

page 188 — Information on 'Fast Tracking' asylum seeker claims sourced from Asylum Seeker Resource Centre (2014).

South Island (Pulu Atas)

page 195 — Reference the earth 'once had enormous tides surging hundreds of metres', from Carson (1968) pp. 10, 11.

North Keeling (Pulu Keeling)

page 198–199 — Information on biodiversity on North keeling sourced from Department of Environment and Energy (no date).

Home Island (Pulu Selma)

page 205 — History of Prison Island from Clunies Ross (2009) p. 27.

page 211 — Statistics of Home Island population from Bunce (1988) p. 136 and Wynne (2019).

page 212–213 — Quote re: John Cecil Clunies-Ross studying, ‘all the science subjects: maths, additional maths, chemistry and physics, plus English, one modern language, French, one classical language, Latin, and an arts subject, English literature’ sourced from Clunies-Ross (2009) p. 132.

page 213 — Quote, ‘The very sad point is the whole population is illiterate…’ sourced from ibid, p. 132.

page 213 — Quote re: the Eastern Extension Telegraph Staff who had ‘nothing but the highest praise for [John Clunies-Ross]’ sourced from ibid, p. 118.

page 213 — Webb describing the lack of schooling as ‘rather an advantage in such a community on the present lines.’ sourced from ibid p. 119.

page 213 — Heath quote, ‘Traditionally education on Cocos was vocation orientated…This form of practical education suited the island’s needs.’ from ibid, p. 235.

page 214 — Heath’s statement that very basic efforts at education on Home Island were instrumental in the Cocos Malay beginning to shift toward ‘a less Clines-Ross-reliant Island governance.’ from ibid, p. 239.

page 217 — The Australian Government’s enactment of an ordinance that made education on the island compulsory, describes by Clunies-Ross as ‘unnecessary’ in ibid, p. 241.

page 217 — Quote ‘Up until the turn of the century, the inhabitants of Cocos rarely saw individuals from the outside world.’ and reference to supervision all the visits by the Cocos Malay to Direction Island in Bunce (1988) p. 53.

page 217 — This included control of Home Islander’s access to Direction and West Islands, as well as ensuring that entry to Home Island by the outside world was allowed by invitation only in ibid, p. 61.

page 218 — John Clunies Ross’ lucrative contracts on both West and Direction Islands sourced from ibid, p. 61 and Clunies-Ross, p. 175.

page 221 — Quote, ‘The Christmas Island Phosphate Company was incorporated in London on the 14th of January 1897…’ and the reference to George Clunies-Ross and Sir John Murray together discovering the rich deposits of phosphate on Christmas Island in February 1896, sourced from ibid, p. 79.

page 221 — The reference to shares not being sold until 1949, from ibid, p. 150.

page 221 — The reference to labourers as young as thirteen, working eleven-hour days six days a week and eight hours on Sunday, as well as the three hundred and thirteen men working the mines that died, sourced from Hunt (2011) pp. 13, 28, 30.
page 222 — The Estate office that was converted into a classroom in the grounds of Oceania House when Clunies-Ross started at school sourced from Clunies-Ross (2009) p. 236.
page 224 — This impact of the Second World War on the Cocos (Keeling) Islands, including the 'eight thousand three hundred military personnel on the atoll' and the push toward emigration from Bunce (1988) pp. 56–59.
page 224 — The deception of the Cocos Malay about Tawau sourced from Clunies-Ross (2009) p. 152.
page 224 — Information about numbers of people were shipped off the atoll, the death of 'deck passengers' on the voyage and suicide sourced from Bunce (1988) p. 59.
page 226 — Quote, 'The Cocos Malay community is a reserved and self-contained social world….' from ibid p. 99.
page 243 — Figure 1 from author's personal collection (2016).

Conclusion — The Archipelago of Us

page 244 — The phrase 'decontextualising cosmology' from Bird Rose (2013) p. 3.
page 244 — The phrase the 'slow ethics of encounter' from ibid p. 12.
page 245 — Quote defining tidalectics as 'an alternative model of space and time, a "tidalectic" between 'past and present, land and sea, the local and the global' from DeLoughrey (2011) p. 803.
page 245 — Details of Brathwaite's publication history from Poetry Foundation (2019).
page 245 — Quote about the importance of tidalectics in helping us think in 'global, transoceanic and transregional terms', as well as the ocean as a place of interconnection, commonality and mutuality and exchange from Perera (2009) pp. 3, 48, 60.

page 245 — Quote, ‘archipelagos challenge continental thinking’ and ‘a trans-oceanic connectivity of decolonial processes that demand a move away from a nationally driven articulation of belonging…’ from Gómez-Barris, M. and Joseph, M. (2019) p. 1.

page 246 — Film ‘The Hungry Tide’ (2011) Zubrycki.

pages 246-247 — Quote ‘midwived by the moon’ and ‘Until you behold it for yourself, it is almost impossible to believe that…’ from Amitav Gosh (2005) pp6-8.

page 248 — Fijian writer Epili Hau’ofa referring to his home as a ‘sea of islands’ from Hau’ofa (2009) pp. 6-7.

page 248 — Antonio Benitez Rojo using the analogy of the Milky Way to describe the Caribbean islands from Benitez Rojo (1985) p. 432.

page 248 —Quotes from Shemak (2011) pp17-21.

page 249 — ‘Fair Go’ use in Australian politics from Karp (2018).

page 250 — The assertion ‘Gibson tells us our myths can inform us if we are willing to learn from them’ from Gibson (2009) p. 174.

page 250-251 — Quote, ‘Australia saw itself as a utopia and a working man’s paradise…’ from National Museum of Australia (no date)

page 251 — The phrase ‘whiteness was under threat’, as well as the quote, ‘….basically meant having a domestic policy geared toward the continuing extermination of the culture of the colonised Indigenous people…’ from Hage (2003) p. 53.

page 251 — Reference to whiteness as an ‘historical category’ as well as the quote ‘…access to humanity and to “dignity and hope” within the nation.’ from ibid, p. 50.

page 252 — The term ‘white worrier’ and the quote, ‘…this is…where white anxiety emerged…At the basis of this anxiety is the simple fact that…some Europeans were capable of living up to the ‘civilized ideals’ of white Europeanness with greater success that others …’ from Hage ibid pp. 2, 50.

page 252 — Hage’s definition of ‘paranoia’ from ibid p. 49.

page 253 — Gatens and Lloyd quote from Hage (2002) pp. 88–89.

page 254 — Poole quote form ibid pp. 87, 88.

page 255 — Figure 2 from author’s personal collection (2013).

page 256 — Figure 3 from author’s personal collection (2016).

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