

The Archipelago of Us

**A search for our identity in Australia's
most remote territories**

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Contents

Introduction: Approaching the Archipelago7

Christmas Island

1. Returning	15
2. Trees Honour the Company They Keep.....	22
3. Our Tenuous Place.....	40
4. Suspension	45
5. Remembering	49
6. Pete Parts the Wild Horse's Mane	60
7. At the Bottom of Our History Is Race.....	63
8. A Door in My Ribs.....	75
9. Hand Held to the Flow	81
10. Behind the Wire	88
11. A Person Like Any Other.....	93
12. The Wild Air	100
13. Leaving Space	109
14. Walking Backwards Toward Light	120
15. An Island of Hungry Ghosts.....	138
16. Living with the Goddess of the Sea	144
17. Turning Back	152
18. Between Islands.....	155

Cocos (Keeling) Islands

19. West Island (Pulu Panjang).....	179
20. The End of the Line.....	195
21. Quarantine	212
22. South Island (Pulu Atas)	223
23. North Keeling (Pulu Keeling).....	231
24. Home Island (Pulu Selma) – Part I	239
25. Home Island (Pulu Selma) – Part II.....	260
26. Direction Island (Pulu Tikus)	272
27. North Point	280
28. Heading Home	284

Epilogue: The Archipelago of Us

Notes

References.....

Author Note

Introduction: Approaching the Archipelago

This morning the world was still. One after the other booby birds flew past, a low white stream, running along island's edge and weaving around palm trees. At sunrise, 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 get into the small 4WD a friend has lent me, and drive slowly and wide-eyed into memory, into Silver City, where tired flats sit high on the hill in front of a glinting panorama of ocean. An old man in a worn cotton singlet leans out from an aluminium window, looking out as I look in. The streets are quiet. All along the turn-off, red crabs are rain-glazed and paint-bright. Behind them, the jungle rolls by, dense and layered: palms and pandanus, vine and banyan, tree ferns and elephant ears, a terrain of green reaching wide for light. But it is what I have forgotten that I am undone by, a scent rich and complex – the smell of journeys treading carefully over forest floor. It is the scent of life and death, rot and growth, and of those who stepped with me, stepping into me, their trace deep under my skin.

This is a story of return. Christmas Island is monolithic; a sole peak surrounded by endlessly shifting sea in Australia's most

remote territory; an island a mere 350 kilometres from the southern shores of Indonesia, yet 1500 kilometres from the Australian mainland to which it belongs. In 2011, my family and I packed up our home near Perth and moved to this isolated semi-submarine mountain. My husband and I began teaching English to asylum-seeker children and young adults held in detention on the island as part of Australia's border protection policies under the Gillard Government. After a year, distressed and disheartened by the suffering we witnessed behind the wire, we made the decision to move to the Cocos (Keeling) Islands, 900 kilometres away. We lived on this tropical atoll approximately halfway between Australia and Sri Lanka for two years, before returning to the Australian mainland in 2014.

Though I chose to step away from its paradisaical shores, the troubled landscape of the Indian Ocean Territories never left me. This world of water lapped at my fringes night and day, bringing a relentless tide of questions, eroding beliefs about my country and who I thought I was. In particular, my experiences of Australia's detention system on both Christmas Island and the Cocos (Keeling) Islands refused to let me be. The story of the islands had become so irrevocably entangled in my own, that in 2016 I found myself boarding a plane back to the Indian Ocean Territories in order to make sense of my forever-changed life. What had I witnessed on the islands that I needed so strongly to make sense of? What was it, after five years, I was unable to accept and let go? Since childhood, I had understood my 'Fair Go' country as a place where everyone had an equal chance to work and thrive, and where each person's inherent worth as a human would be upheld. Did I still believe in my 'Fair Go' nation after all that I had seen?

These are the questions that found me standing back on the tarmac of this pristine and marginal world, that led me to be

driving slowly into Silver City and all that lay beyond. This is the story of my gradual journey toward understanding – both an understanding of myself as someone completely undone and reinvented through my experiences of people and place, but also the tale of an intense reckoning with the mythology of my country, a tale told as ‘history’, but also revealed through silence. My journey is an invitation to other Australians who wish to face the history of their nation squarely: step with me between palm and pandanus, place your feet gently on the forest floor. Breathe the air of abundance and decay, take the hands of generations of people who have walked though this place, let our trace lie deep under your skin.

Christmas Island

I. 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. It feels almost inconceivable this moment has arrived, that it is possible to return. My husband and I make it to the airport just an hour before my flight and, after checking in, it is a rushed goodbye, our 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 look out the window at the bland tarmac, at the smear of cloud and drizzle of rain, and feel a huge sense of dissociation.

When the plane lifts off, 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 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 caterpillar in its twig case. Alongside 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, and I press against the window, feel my heart quicken, eyes alive.

I am watching now. I am watching the expansive 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 continue to chatter across the aisle. I soon begin to realise they are talking about familiar places and names, 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 centres' 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. It suddenly dawns on me that I will land on the atoll before the monolith of Christmas Island and am taken aback – I feel unprepared, cheated. I thought I was doing this trip in chronological order, but now I am first being taken to a place I once 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 brilliant blue, the water in the lagoon is clear as glass. I look down at the sand fanning around island's edge, its shapes of ocean, coral and carved 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 blue 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 pedalling 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 where the local bus is heading out to the ferry at Rumah Baru. As we fly along the length of West Island, images, memories and faces flash up as the plane's wheels come down. Soon we bounce onto the tarmac, braking 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. The aircraft's window now looks out the other side of West Island, framing a view of the sea, the reef, the homes along the runway, my blue home facing the runway. They have cut down the palm trees. The aircraft comes to a halt, a gangplank is attached and a forklift drives noisily in. The cabin door opens to the familiar scent of dry grass and salt, sun and trade winds. We are asked to disembark.

Some familiar Cocos Malay faces greet 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, walking past the rope and people in their Border Force uniforms, out down the beige 1970s hall and into sunlight, out into a crowd of faces, so many faces of people I thought I would never see again. I am hugged briefly but warmly, then through the crowd comes a slim, short woman with dreadlocks.

'Trish!' 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 her two youngest sons share a large lounge chair, eating bread. Trish's youngest boy, 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 grin.

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

'No, no, Trish,' I say, 'my bag is packed full 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.'

'You know me, Trish, I'm a Virgo, don't want to miss my plane.'

The truth is, it is all too much and I need to retreat. We hug again and I step through the gate, between familiar faces in Border Force uniforms who insist on patting me down and doing a bag check. Then I am seated back by my window on the plane.

The plane arcs once again and 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 seagrass. At this height, the detail is unknowable but incredibly beautiful, an artwork in turquoise, blues and greens. I crane my neck but the atoll's 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 imbued with a dark history, where life pushes up, shouting and glimmering, fringed by a delicate crochet of sea foam in light.

Nearing Christmas Island, the plane descends through dense vapour, so at first the scene is hidden, then abruptly the thick clouds 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 abundant canopy catches the sun and folds its secrets into shadow. Overhead, golden bosun birds shimmer, trailing bright plumes over 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. Out of nowhere, 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, 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 ushered 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, and the Mandarin teacher at the local high school. He is also one of the interviewees I teed up while I was on the mainland. He turns to me and we embrace, then pile our things in the back of Jo’s 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. A sensation like heat courses through my body, I 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, then step out on the deck. Several metres in front of me the ocean jostles, is edgy in a way I have seen nowhere else. Watching its uneasy aspect, I picture the ocean floor, its inconceivable depths – no wonder the water cannot break or resolve.

Grabbing my swimming gear, I 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.

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 suspended clouds of white as they excrete out sand. Whatever was left sleeping in me is now wide-eyed, nerves quick to know: *Oh this, you are here, you have returned!*