

Wadjemup

They saw men coming, across the water. Specks at first. Knew they'd come. Insatiable that desire to tame, to hold, to name. Screams ricocheted across the waves as ancient trees toppled to make way for houses, for churches, for prisons. Men came in rowboats as wildfires danced on the horizon. Crimson light, plumes of black smoke eclipsing the sun. Fire, hot and red. Red, seeping into scarred earth, absorbed into that vein stretching across time, pulsing onwards, fusing life past and present. But they were here before the sea rose and they'll be here when men are gone. They will witness it all. They are the echoes, the shadows. Around you, beneath you, within you.

A crew of ten slump, exhausted, as their battered boat runs ashore. Fear hangs on the wind and in the water. Their bodies roll forward like slaters, their necks pulled downwards by collars and chains. Their captors, two men, thickset and dark-cloaked, leap from the bow. Their first steps unsteady on the island.

'Get out here, you bastards,' one yells. The other looks away.

The prisoners roll gnarled muscles and stiff limbs overboard. Among them, a boy. He doesn't understand the cussing, just the growl of their faces, bleached like cuttlefish. He looks up, above the sandy beach, beyond the limestone outcrops and into the saltbush scrub. His ears attune to the lowest frequencies. There's a hum through the tea trees. And, although his dark skin is slick with perspiration, he shivers. He recognises that primordial hum and prickles with cold. His lips, salty from sea spray, move without thought.

'Wadjemup,' he whispers. It is the last word he'll ever speak.

They sleep on the beach that night as they will for many more to come. Later, they'll find refuge in a coastal cave while the cells, set to occupy six men apiece, reach completion. No bough huts any longer. No corroborees around campfires. The boy thinks of his family. *Do they know I am here? Do they think I am dead?*

The prisoners are chained to a pole while they sleep, lest they harbour dreams of escape. But there's no dreaming here. Only the moans of loss, and the constant purr of the land. Looking back at the mainland from the eastern side of the island is like peering out of a reflection. This inverted perspective unsettles the boy. He feels trapped in another dimension. The prisoners are fading counterfeits in a joyless abyss, with only the stars tethering them to the real.

The boy's body is thin and cold. There's no meat on his little frame. He wriggles deeper into the sand and looks for pinpricks of light across the ocean. Imagines his mother waiting and wailing, her face all shadows and agony in the firelight.

There's a disturbance in the water offshore and, forgetting his chains, the boy jumps up, jolting the lore man beside him awake. The man startles as though struck, relaxes only when he sees it is the child. The boy points out to sea and together they contemplate the moon-lit ripples. Then they see it, a huge wing-like flipper rising above the water. It holds position and the boy holds

his breath. Then it is gone, a phantom in the dark. The man, Jarra, looks at him. Eyes the colour of misery.

‘Not our time yet.’

There’s a deep scar on his shoulder and a bald patch in his beard. He’s old. Ageless. This man will teach the boy to fish, to read the seasons and smell the sea. He’ll procure rust-coloured shells that metamorphose into animals, he’ll drip saltwater on a fevered face. But now, he simply reaches out a callused hand and touches the boy’s matted hair before resuming his spot in the sand. It is a small token of kindness. The boy’s first in weeks. Seeds of hope sprinkle in his stomach and he falls asleep willing the whale’s return.

From first light, they must garden and clear bush. They’re permitted to hunt in the afternoons. An allowance that proves fruitless. Rather than kangaroos, dignified and strong, there are quokkas, short-tailed and rodent-faced. The boy need only hold out his hand and the witless creatures approach. He detests them, wants to kick them. He was once this unguarded.

He turns, instead, toward the coast, the fragile crescent between suffering and oblivion. Some days he finds Jarra at Little Salmon Bay, a sheltered lagoon with shallow waters. Jarra coaxes him out, past the limestone reef that hugs the cliff, where mosaic sunlight dances on the seabed and camouflaged creatures lurk among thick tangles of seaweed.

‘Come on. You’re not afraid.’

With hair slicked back, brown eyes shining and saltwater beading on his knotted shoulders, Jarra’s face softens. Paddling timidly behind, the boy squints and catches a glimpse of what he must have looked like as a younger man. Happy and fearless. Pink coral gives way to violet and Jarra dives, retrieving crayfish beneath the rock. The boy watches, and he learns.

At low tide shells clink delicately, tumbling together in the frothy carpet. He gathers fistfuls of cownose, anemones, abalone, turban and cone, separating them into piles. All species, all speckles, all sizes. Here the sand is so white it is blinding, a perfect canvas for his treasures. He thinks of the bark paintings of his tribe. The stories of his dreaming. Chalky skeletons and animal viscera, the cross-hatching of people brandishing boomerangs and spears. The shells become his palette: yellow for sun, brown for land, white for clouds and purple for water. Orange he prizes for the animals, fingering their corrugated surfaces, rolling the sharp edges on his palms. He thanks the molluscs for these gifts and paints the beach in legend. Creates scenes and sprawling sagas. Caught in this flow of vision and enterprise, he is untouchable. Only when the cerulean sky above the mainland turns deep cyan, does the boy retreat to higher land. He surveys his work in the fading light. The stories he cannot speak. He leaves them for the sea to claim. Wishes on the waves.

Months pass and more prisoners arrive. They hail from the deserts, the mallee, the sand plains and the forests. And they speak as many languages. Fearsome leaders hunted and trapped. A growing colony of forced labourers. The boy watches from rocky outcrops above the shore and wonders, *When will the boats take me back? Back to Noongar boodjar, back to my people.*

They quarry limestone rocks, heaving them 80 metres above sea level to the proposed site of a lighthouse. He doesn't know, of course, what function this structure will serve. A gallows? He's seen men hanged in the Quod, forced to watch as their bodies writhe and convulse on the rope. Fish strung on a line. He's seen men collapse, crushed beneath their load. Another bone, another stone in the wall. He's seen men crumpled, their bodies made ugly by instruments of torture. He learns that survival is luck. All he can do is carry on. And so he adapts. His hands no longer know the smooth wood of a spear, but the rough work of a stonemason. There's little time now for shell stories on the beach. The tinny slam of pickaxes mingles with birdsong and cicadas as his sweat binds the mortar.

It takes nine years for the stark white obelisk to reach the sky. Nine years for the boy to become a man. His body stretches, becomes strong, conditioned by pain and monotony. There's no ceremony to mark this transformation. No women. No babies. For this listless existence, he's deemed civilised. The superintendent is pleased with him. He'll be going home in winter.

He thinks, *One day my children will hear these stories. But they won't know this place. This place that belongs in the afterlife.*

Winter comes and with it a fug of contagion. He can't sleep for the coughing and wakes to find vomit and faeces on the damp, dirt floor of the cell. Men are hoisted into carts and wheeled to the hospital on the edge of the settlement. Makeshift tents are erected to meet demand. But there's no remedy. The soft soil of the woods is upturned to receive them.

He escapes to the water in the afternoons, scrubs his skin raw, dives and rolls through the surf until he feels saltwater in his gills. He thinks of the shells he collected as a child, swept home by the sea. Soon he will follow.

Trapped nightly, he succumbs. Days pass like hours as he swirls through time and consciousness. He tastes saltwater as a kindly hand washes his face. Outside the tent, wind buffets the trees. They lean toward him, confiding, fan flowers tittering beneath their branches. Along the beaches, spinifex and coastal rosemary sigh. And around the salt lakes samphire and saltbush murmur. He listens and they speak. Insistent, urgent.

Time to go home.

Home, he thinks. *Yes. It is makuru: the season of new beginnings.* His family will be moving inland toward the scarp where the flowering she-oaks beckon.

He exhales and ascends like a gull, through the canvas roof of the mud-stained tent, through the branches of those talking trees and above the prison until he is unreachable. Beyond even the clutch of the lighthouse and its roving beam. He hovers in the obliterating blue.

The outline of the island is like the frame threads of a spiderweb: curved lines meet sharp points while the inner spirals are pot-holed in places by salt lakes. The land is scarred with tracks, burnt woodlands, craggy limestone outposts. All is still and quiet. The sun edges closer to the horizon and he moves toward it. In the turquoise waters at the western tip a humpback whale breaches the surface. The creature's knowing eye recognises him, beseeching. He lays down upon the smooth,

wet rubber, his rough hands stroking the slippery back. His skin no longer burns but is cool and soft, caressed by saltwater and covered in sea foam. Together they submerge, the creature's powerful tail propelling them onwards, toward the deep ocean in the west. Toward his ancestors. Molecules of light scatter, painting the sky a brilliant orange-red. Behind them the island stands against a backdrop of blue-violet. The lighthouse thrusts forever upward, a dramatic coral-pink.

A girl stands, back against the lighthouse, face toward the horizon in a twilight that has spanned more than a century. A century that witnessed ships sink, a penal colony flare and subside, resorts grow, tourists come and go. She enjoys the rough texture of the stone scratching her back and looks up at the staggering monolith. It makes her dizzy, the way the clouds drift overhead. She feels as though she is moving, her and the lighthouse on a conveyor belt of time. Illuminated in the soft pink glow of the sunset, the lighthouse is ethereal.

It couldn't have been built by human hands, she thinks, but by gods.

In the sky to the east there's a rainbow flash: a parachute carrying tandem skydivers floats like an iridescent jellyfish above the settlement. She imagines her parents, sipping beer beneath the spindly tea trees at the hotel, watching their descent.

Thinking of her parents breaks her reverie. They'll be waiting. She glances at an empty wrist. Her watch is back at the tent. But they won't be worried yet. It's still light. She untangles her bike from the clump near the path, climbs aboard and kicks the stand. Hurling downhill she passes an elderly couple, ruddy-faced, in socks and sandals, sun hats toggled tight under their chins. Their glossy map flutters in her slipstream. A gritty assortment of shells jingle in her shorts' pocket. Ahead, teenagers bearing tanned limbs and neon swimmers hold hands and lick ice creams. She rings her bell, once, twice, three times and they diverge just in time for her to careen through the middle.

'Oi! Watch out!'

She smiles, giddy with freedom. Passing the blushing salt lake, a dugite retreats into a roadside cave. She glimpses its slender tail before it flicks into shadow. Salt-crusting hair whips at her face as she speeds past ochre cottages. The air is rich with seaweed and sausages. There's a small cluster of shops near the tourist centre: bakery, grocery store, a pharmacy well-stocked in sunscreen and a boutique specialising in shapeless resort wear at exorbitant prices. Here, quokkas are more plentiful than seagulls. They collect chips and other castoffs, darting across footpaths while chased, in equal measure, by small children and smartphone-wielding tourists. She slows to wind through them.

Nearing the hotel, she sees a red ferry bump the jetty. On the top deck, bicycles stand to attention. Ferries arrive every half hour, scattering visitors like dandelion seeds in the breeze. This is the last, until tomorrow. Clouds are lit salmon-pink above the water, spun sugar in the sky. She slips through a footpath tunnel of shrugging peppermint trees to arrive at the hotel entrance. There's live entertainment: a boy-girl harmony with acoustic guitars that casts its musical net over the beach,

touching even the boats moored offshore. The woman's voice is a fragile warble. The man has a smoky drawl.

The forlorn reflection disquiets the girl. Her eyes move from the duo to find her parents in the crowd. They're near the front. Her father's arm is around her mother and they're swaying in wistful contentment. Her baby sister is asleep in the pram beside them. In a moment, they'll ask her why she's late. She'll have to confess she left her watch in the tent. Her mother has warned her, obliquely, about leaving valuables there.

'Anyone could be snooping around.'

She knows they'll think her irresponsible, too immature for the holiday freedom they've bestowed. *It's still bright, really*, she thinks. The hotel's festoon lights are just twinkling. She turns, decides to double back. *What's a few more minutes?* Legs pumping, she hightails through the settlement toward Tentland.

There's a group of young men ahead. Their collective zigzag gait fills the road. Some hold bottles by the neck and there's a reckless rumble to their voices. Her skin prickles. Unpredictability makes her nervous. She wishes she could turn invisible. There's no way around them without off-roading and, at this speed, through the sand, she'd sail head over handlebars. But she doesn't want to stop. A sudden smash unsteadies her. A loose-gripped bottle has splintered into sharp pieces on the bitumen. The men stagger sideways as the sticky dregs splash their feet. She winds through the gap, grinding glass as she goes.

There are no signs of interference back at the tent. Only a patchy quokka rummaging around the barbecue area. She attaches the silicon band and tilts her wrist to catch light on the face. 7.05 and getting darker. She's horrified to discover a new problem: a punctured tyre. She starts running, lungs fit to burst, along the path back to the hotel. But the memory of the drunken men returns and her stomach knots. She flees through the woods where branches sway, bone-grey, in the wind. Sticks snap and leaf litter crunches underfoot. A primitive switch flicks and her eyes begin scanning for snakes. But darkness descends on this shadowy corner of the island rendering her vigilance futile. She's disoriented. Flooded by panic, tears swell and she stops. *Why can't I hear anyone?*

In daylight hours she'd have imagined herself in a fairy glen. But the light has turned, summoning the eerie beauty of a cemetery. Her feet tingle. Is the ground vibrating? She feels rather than hears a low keening, more baritone than beehive. Barely perceptible. Then, suddenly, behind her, a wild stampede. She is prey to encircling monsters. Panting children run past, delirious. One crouches behind a tree trunk to her right and others disperse into the darkness. Strobing torch light follows in their wake. It pauses on her slight figure, inspects her face then moves on, hungrily pouncing on the child behind the trunk.

'Spotto!' yells a disembodied voice.

Paralysis passes. Adrenaline catapults her out. She reaches the hotel, pale-faced and breathless. Her mother scoops her up and holds her. In place of a scolding she is wrapped in one of her sister's blankets and rocked in warm arms, like a child half her age.

She sleeps fitfully that night. Haunting visions disturb her. She dreams of the island and its visitors. She sees them, as though looking at a cross-section of the earth in a science textbook. On the surface are people cocooned in sleeping bags, layers of soil beneath them. Then, in the deep, there are skeletons. Hundreds of them. A grotesque bunk bed of history. The sunken sockets of the dead stare, unreadable. She hears screaming and forces herself awake. It is only her sister, fussing in the dawn. A pocketful of forgotten shells jab at her thigh.

'I'll be back,' she whispers to the baby.

Her parents stir at the screech of zip and flap of canvas. But she's already away, barefoot and rushing to the lapping waters at Pinky Beach. Magpies chortle at her back as rocky path gives way to sand. Her soles delight at the effervescent touch of sea and she stands shin-deep, retrieving the shells from her pocket. They're still warm from her body. With arm outstretched she sprinkles them like ashes — plink, plink — and feels lighter as they sink.

The relic remains. Unmanned for decades in an age where satellites guide seamen. Was it ever a monument to civilisation? It has long presided over death: shipwrecks, suicides, sickness, slaughter. A giant tombstone atop a vast burial ground. Ablaze each night in the radiant colours of restless spirits brought here and forgotten.