

This exhibition is an island

## Chapter one: landfall

On the ninth day of April an island was sighted on the horizon. At the call from the crow's nest, the captain ordered a sharp change of course and the *Saudade* listed to port, sending lamp, inkwell, and the mementos of home sliding across the chipped walnut of my bureau as I sat at work. All but the lamp fell from the edge and clattered to the floor, the inkwell discharging some of its contents on the way down. Although overcast outside, a hazy sun still projected a soft spotlight through the porthole that tracked around the cabin, eventually coming to rest on a small section of oriental carpet I had found in a bazaar on the day we embarked. Its intricate, incomplete pattern had fascinated me for some reason. More practically, though, it brought the illusion of comfort to the close confines of my quarters. For an instant I was reminded of how far I was from home, but excitement at landfall quickly overwhelmed my nostalgic reveries, and I rushed to join the rest of the crew on deck.

There was an excited bustle as rigging was changed and landing skiffs made ready. At a squint I could just make out a blue bubble on the horizon sandwiched between the flat granite of grey sea and an even ceiling of clouds. A half hour later the amorphous shape had resolved into a sharp geometric triangle. Still blue from the aerial perspective, it was almost as if a tear had been made through the nimbus to the sky beyond. The land rose to an off-

centre peak creating an unusual, almost impossible overhang that brought further mystery to what we might find there. The journey had been hard for more than a week. With little wind to propel us, and no real aim, we could only continue eastwards hoping to reach land before falling off the end of the world. But the listlessness that had set in among all the crew during those long days evaporated at the promise of fresh water, adventure, and discovery. And for some of the less savoury members slopping around the bilges, the hope of native women to sate their desires loomed large. On more than one occasion I had found them pouring over a few indiscreet items I had brought with me as keepsakes and maintained locked in a casket in my cabin. How they had engineered a way into both room and safe-box, I had never enquired – both out of personal safety and an element of shame should word of them spread. Instead we struck a tacit pact that they would be returned in exchange for me sparing them a smarting reprimand from the captain. I was myself relieved at this unspoken agreement as to make this public would have brought me considerable blushes, at the very least. From then on I moved to keeping the most precious items tucked inside my undershirt for security.

My own hopes for the island were for a rich tropical flora and fauna untouched by any kind of human affect. Darwin's own explorations and writings had been the primary inspiration for me to leave civilisation behind and join this crew, as well as to escape my previous misdemeanours. But even my own scientific curiosity sometimes gave way to fantasies as I dreamed of sweet fruits never

before seen or tasted, myriad blossoms alive with brightly coloured insects, and in more whimsical moments dragons of myth made flesh. And, within an hour, I could make out forest-clad mountains rising up from the island, and a scar of brightly coloured sand as a beach that seemed to tantalise my fantasies yet further. But moreover, whatever we individually hoped to find there, the whole crew like myself simply itched to set foot on solid land again.

We were more than a mile from shore when the depth sounding indicated shallow reefs rising underneath; the captain ordered the sails to be furled and anchor dropped for fear of grounding. Without charts or clear location the tides could not be predicted, so landing boats were lowered with teams of strong oarsmen who could stay the distance on the row to land. I pleaded to be on the first boat, but was relegated to the third launch having to make do with the privilege of being the first gentleman to land there, not the first man. While no expert, I suspected Maritime Law dictated the first to set foot on land could claim it as their own, and so was unsurprised to see the captain himself stand afore the first launch. His team looked especially burly, and while my launch carried tents, canteens, and my modest supply of scientific equipment, theirs was loaded with weapons.

It took twenty minutes of hard rowing against the tide before the beach breaks took over and propelled the skiff towards the shoreline. The water was clear beneath us as I trailed my hand and watched shoals of fish pass underneath as thick clouds. We made

good time with the captain's boat arriving only seconds before our own, my team of oarsman straining to their last.

When sand scraped against the bottom of the boat, the second oarsman excitedly jumped out into the surf only to fall, struck by heavy rocks hurtling around beneath the surface from a strong undertow. A brief bout of laughter broke out in amusement of the youngster's unbridled enthusiasm, then a squalor of shouts and hurried activity that sent the boat rocking as his crewmates reached down to fish him out of the sea. Diluted by seawater, blood flowed in pale gout down his legs, making the scene seem brutal even if, in fact, the injuries were minor. A more experienced seaman then sprang nimbly from aft to land beyond the spume. Rope in hand he dragged the craft up the beach far enough that we could safely disembark one at a time.

My senses had become accustomed to the ocean's swell so as my feet fell on the beach the entire landmass seemed to roll as if we were still on the high sea. It lent a dream-like quality to the moment combined with the almost unbelievable relief that we had, at last, found this place. Despite all our excitement, a strange hush fell over the party as every muscle of the crew sagged from the exhaustion of the row. Grog was passed round to refresh us and following a brief respite the captain ordered some to build a fire, others to set up camp where the sands disappeared into thick brush. Others set to the tasks of replenishing water supplies or

casting nets into the water for fish. Deserted as the island seemed, no one stood guard.

I set about my own work slowly, first taking bearings with a compass; with pad and pencil I drew out a rough map of the beach, pacing distances from tideline to grass, and noting approximate elevations. The beach slopped quite sharply, and piles of those rocks lay in patches where the sea had gathered them up in eddies then dumped them as the tide subsided. Other sections were unblemished fine sand, and still others were claggy like wet cement where barely visible streams leached down the beach. It was clear that a more substantial stream or river lay less than half a mile to the south, and the party sent to refill our canteens made their way in its direction. Interested as I was to join them and explore further, I tried to discipline myself to remain on the shoreline, and address the act of cataloguing the island as methodically as I could.

Facing almost due East I looked out towards where the moored *Saudade* lay, my back to that geometric rise of land at the island's heart, now clearly lush with dense vegetation. To the south, my right, the beach opened out into a flat plain where a tent was being erected. And so I moved northwards to find some solace in my work. I searched among the knots of weed and flora scattered on the tideline, strange hybrids of natural forms with what seemed to be flotsam and jetsam tangled up within them. An immediate sense of disappointment set in, this virginal island was

already tainted by the outside world. But such is our world today, I mused; no place is untouched by man's reach, even this island. What would it mean to think of this as a single ecology with us as a part? What impact does the history of our culture have on such an island with its unique biogeography? No longer simply a survival of the fittest in the raw, but a cooked melange flavoured with migration of peoples passing in flight lines along with the birds. Instead of an enclosure, then, a node, just as unique but no longer isolated – a composite of its own trajectories between here and there, between the local and global. And moreover, how will what we leave behind in this place change it, whether we come as conquerors, discoverers, explorers, or tourists?

With these questions in mind, I continued to illustrate what I could in words and pictures, all the time mulling over whether what I saw there might be so special, so unique, how I was caught up in the world like everything else, and that the moment we set foot upon the beach we formed part of each other's history, culture even. My first sketches were littered with ideas hurriedly noted between the outlines of seaweed, shells, and crabs for later classification. But soon dusk fell, the light faded, and I returned to sit by the campfire where fish of various sizes and a multitude of colours were being roasted. We all sat together, gentlemen and bilge crew alike, passing round sweet spring water and bottles of rum, and all was jovial. Throughout the voyage I had taken dinners with the captain, and we had grown weary of each other's company, so to sit with the crew for the first time was refreshing

for us both. All evening they told tall tales of their previous adventures and shared dreams of the treasures and horrors that may lie inland. As the island was as yet unnamed, we made a round of suggesting what to call it. Many of the shipmen thought to name the island after their mothers or lovers, the captain suggesting more patriotic imagery in naming it after the king. The most peculiar suggestion came from the lookout who had first laid eyes on the island from the crow's nest. *Mostrando*, he declared, which I misheard as 'monster', causing much hilarity among all around the fire.

Among my equipment I had stashed that small patch of rug from the cabin floor that gave me some false sense of the comforts of home. As the night continued, my own reveries drifted to the odd fate of those fish, yanked from their security by such an alien predators as the crew. We were monsters to them I supposed, although it did not stop me taking pleasure in the charred meat. Finally, the excitement died down and one by one we fell into sleep. As I lay down, my head rested next to the stain on the rug from the inkwell that dropped earlier in the day. The blot had doubled itself from being folded in my pack. The resulting pattern appeared like a death's head moth, both insect and devilish face in one. As I passed into sleep, it seemed to crawl into my dreams, a grim premonition of things to come.

## Chapter two: river network

After a week exploring the shoreline the whole crew itched to move further inland. On my part, I had discovered little of note, not one species that was wildly distinct from those already documented in the bestiaries or catalogues of fauna that I had brought with me for reference. The odd crab with a particularly large claw, herons with especially yellow markings beneath their wings, or lilies that veered from the traditional spectrum into rose, pink, and purple were all worthy side notes, but did not qualify as new species to which I could proudly apply my name.

The forest was not far off and its lush, dark interior seemed to beckon us towards it. But the captain had forbade us all from roaming beyond the edge of the grassland, instilling order to ensure that the coastline was well surveyed, charted, and explored before moving onwards. Finally, while sitting around the campfire on the tenth day he announced it was time to move on. A party of four would remain on the beach and maintain the camp in rotation with the skeleton crew still aboard the *Saudade*. The rest of us were to pack up in the morning and form the exploration team.

The captain addressed me as a man of science, asking for an opinion on how long the journey inland to the island's apex might take. Although the island was not large, from my estimations it could be a week to ten days trek to arrive and return if the forest

grew as densely as I predicted. Without a pathway to lead us even the relatively shallow incline to the top might be hard going. And that was just the trail. There would be inevitable detours and explorations required en route, so we prepared for a fortnight's excursion.

For my part, I had packed my equipment days ago in anticipation. My work was almost complete on the coast. The tangled unmanaged forests that could be seen all the way to the peak were where I hoped to make my real discoveries. So I bedded down for an early night to be fresh at first light when we planned to depart. On rising, breakfast was a light repast hurriedly eaten. As a gesture of goodwill, I shared a small pot of marmalade with those who were staying behind. It was eaten with the rough bread that had been baked on the firestones overnight. This was an everyday luxury for me; however, for the crew it was a bittersweet novelty. In return they shared coffee stronger than any I was used to, leaving me jittery as much from caffeine as from excitement as we set off.

We chose to follow the fresh water river upstream thereby avoiding the choking tangle of the forest proper. It ran in a relatively straight line, which made our progress inward more rapid than expected. We had all grown used to the constant smashing of the waves in our ears. But this was quickly muffled and replaced by the low buzz of insects, groans of frogs, and chatter of birds. It was not an unfamiliar sound, reminiscent of

Europe's own natural symphonies. Yet it was an orchestra retuned, almost atonal. In response we instinctively spoke in hushed voices as if in the theatre. Treading over rocks and on soft damp earth by the stream all the jovial antics of the beach were quietened to introspection. If that first introduction to Monstrado (as we now all called the island) held relief then trepidation now set in, claustrophobia even. And in response we relied on our memories and thoughts to keep us company.

My own reveries had a feverish nature to them lent by the sticky humid air. No matter how much I loosened my collar, blood pounded in my ears. Visions repeatedly interrupted my concentration as I tried to examine the overall nature of things. The temperate woodlands of Europe, even at their wildest, have a sense of order compared with Monstrado's forests. Trees grow upwards, grasses, and mosses lie in even carpets in between, and sight lines emerge through to the open sky even in the depths of the Germanic Black Forest. Here, things grew on top of others. Roots and branches both flayed out in curves and angles. Layers of vegetation piled up making it difficult to distinguish one species from another.

It brought to mind a report I had read regarding Darwin's *The Origin of the Species*. Reportedly he excised a passage before publication that had described nature not as a linear development but as a more furtive one, constantly modifying itself in reaction to every other thing around it. He likened it to the life of a hedgerow, not a tree. The reason for why he had removed that introduction

was now lost on me. But perhaps it was for fear of exciting even greater protests from those that called him godless for suggesting we were not granted our freedom, not designed, but simply developed. At least apes appear intelligent and honourable. If he was suggesting all our culture was little more than colonies of ants or bees going about our business mindlessly among the undergrowth, even the rational gentlemen of the Royal Institution may have seen him burned as a heretic. There were no reports of Darwin on the Galapagos experiencing a jungle such as those on Monstrado. But I wondered whether he had experienced this same sense of diminishment that had come over me. Following the river, we were not exactly lost, but I no longer had a sense of scale, and could be walking as an insect, a frog, a man, or an elephant.

A pebbled flat afforded us a chance for a midday break from the trek. Tired as I was, I simply sat on my small piece of rug while the men pulled out rations and lit a small fire to cook them. As the flames took hold of damp wood there was an acrid smell that mingled with the odour of loam. I followed the progress of a beetle clambering over leaves and earth and broken twigs. Its mantle was iridescent blue, glinting as it moved. After a yard or so it disappeared into a burrow. Half amused and half curious, I dug my fingers into the earth to root it out and found it gripping hold of a rhizome for shelter. The root structure spread in all directions and the more I dug the deeper the beetle shimmied away, always just far enough to evade my grasp.

I carried on excavating a pit large enough to take my whole hand and still I kept groping no longer able to see where my fingers probed. Suddenly they came upon a slimy soft patch that made me jump up and yelp. The entire party stopped and then burst out in laughter as a toad hopped out and made a dash for the river. Blushes rushed to my cheeks that were already rosy from the heat. But looking down I noticed a blue green filament in the hole. Where my nails had scratched it, copper gleaned from beneath a layer of turquoise oxide. It seemed to sprout out of the rhizome itself, a part of its network, yet wholly inorganic. I pointed this out in a state of excitement that caused some of the crew to mutter audibly that I was mad. But the captain came over to see what had fascinated me so. Seeing the strand of metal poking out, he commented that this was a good sign.

Only then did I realise that this expedition was not in search of hidden treasures of the romantic kind, but more likely funded by a mining company. At this the crew almost salivated at the thought of any percentage they might be owed, quickly forgetting the hunger in their bellies. What no one seemed to grasp, as I did, was that this was not merely about the metal itself. It was not natural; it could not be natural, at least not in the geological sense. Copper did not grow; it had to be refined and shaped. Wire had to be spun. Either it was the work of some species of beetle like the one I had just followed, which might in theory be possible, working the metal from the earth to coat its shell. Or we were not the first to set



foot here? Of the two, the latter seemed the only plausible answer. Only one further question remained, are they still here?

Despite my words of caution, we set off again in haste. I had pulled a section of the rhizome from the earth as a specimen, but had to cut the copper wire with my secateurs as it spread too far into the earth for me to tear it up. Still hungry, as we went we picked various fruits from the trees around us, enjoying the sweet and sometimes meaty juices that burst forth as the skins broke. Those juices made our beards sticky and matted, but we didn't worry. The small river turned to a narrow stream, and we continued on a steady incline until the sun set. As the sky turned red, suddenly all the sounds of the forest shifted from a heady swirling buzz of activity of the day to the night's throbbing, itchy beat of cicadas with occasional bass notes of toads. As the sun shed its final orange light through the gaps of the trees, beams seemed to bend around trunks as if we were stood within a giant lantern. And all around, for a few brief moments, I saw glints of orange reflected from rocks and leaves and bark alike. I peered at one of these spots, and saw that the copper thread ran through the rocks as well as the earth.

Scratching away, it made my hand tingle and occasionally twitch, as if my fingers were frogs' legs at the mercy of Galvani's equipment. But the shock was more than bio-electromagnetic as an idea began to form in my mind. It was not the species that could be my discovery but the island as a whole; beasts and plants were each a cog in the machinery of a complex singular culture. I stared

on, somewhat shocked about how this changed everything around us. I imagined a huge umbilical cord of copper connecting myself to the island. And from there another passing under the ocean and connecting this land to my own. And further still, the whole world pulsing from the pounding of a single beating heart.

But in trying to convey this to the others my words had become unintelligible. I, along with some of the greedier members of the crew, were escorted to the fireside and wrapped in blankets, as despite the heat I shivered and passed into a fever. It seemed that some of those fruit might have more than sweetness to offer.

## Chapter three: the interior

The nausea arrives with seeing double. Not two things at once but two times. That is why we named it Janus.

We had spent almost three weeks on the island. Most of the time we remained within a perimeter of scorched earth that exposed the copper threads in the ground. Mainly we were confined to the interior of the bubble structure, and when we did venture outside it was in hermetically sealed suits. Using a drone scanner we could survey a little further. Its scanners mapped the copper back to its point of origin that lay over the mountain's ridge. But that was beyond the range of the drone's capabilities so we couldn't get any visuals. Regardless, our purpose here lay elsewhere, a study of the supposedly untainted genetic codes of plants and animals in the hope of reinvigorating our own depleted stocks.

As far as we knew the only people to set foot on the island had done so more than a century earlier. We had come across some items that were too far in land to be carried by the sea. Among them was a section of faded carpet, the occasional sheet of writing paper, and some human remains all bleached from the sun. But there were no permanent structures showing on the satellite surveys, and the electro-plane had dropped our field laboratory in a clearing far inland where no one seemed to have ventured. As a working team we had been appointed on behalf of the governing

corporation whose name I will not mention here for fear of breaching a contract that I have still yet to fully read. The main point of the contract was to sign over anything I saw, discovered, or even thought about as their property. In the eight-person team, the appointed team leader was named Alice. An expert in Warburgian scalar-intellectual transformation, her work was groundbreaking, but she was a prickly character. In fact, the whole team were reclusive at best. Contract and team members alike certainly dulled the impetus to put energy into the study rather than simply sit out the contract period, although there is only so much time one can spend in a sterile climate-controlled environment without starting to hear whispering voices.

It had been deemed that any solutions found on the island would be deciphered by quantum hybridisation. My own expertise was in nuclide microscopy cultures, a far cry from this new science. So during the broad vision survey using a ritual algorithm, I was somewhat lost for method and had to go with the flow. Dressed in the ritualistic modern science garb of grey flannel cut in a triangular poncho, Alice laid out a series of points of view mapped onto objects that related to the island to form a complexity map marking out the empty niches that we aimed to fill in. Many of the objects on display – drawings, books, letters – were familiar somehow each reminiscent of old linear taxonomies whose progressive evolution was redundant.

‘When the tool is most a tool, it recedes into a reliable background of subterranean machinery. Equipment is invisible,’ Alice pronounced to lead us into the group analysis. While the whole team nodded in agreement, I suspected the others were as puzzled by the poetics of contemporary biological discourse as I was. Its reliance on language to constitute everything into being didn’t always gel with the reality of the chemicals I observed through the microscope. But such was the current trend and one had to keep up with times. I was drawn to a small scrap of paper, yellowing with age and ink running from years in the jungle. It was one of the few artefacts we had managed to acquire from the nineteenth-century crew’s effects. A diary entry, it told of a time they had been lost at sea. Their vessel, the *Saudade*, had been engulfed by fog and drifted in the doldrums. They navigated using a blank sheet of paper bounded by the ordinals. With only a compass to guide them, scale, distance, and location had become abstract concepts. I identified with this as I moved to look at a model sitting alongside. It was a model of our own bubble that was included in the life-matrix of the island according to standard ethno-biological protocol. Every detail of the interior was reproduced precisely, from the grain of the Marbaline floor to a model of this same model in such high definition that it created a sense of vertigo to look into it. ‘Good’, said Alice as she saw me lost in imagination. ‘Pascal had always told us that “the last proceeding of reason is to recognise that there is an infinity of things which are beyond it”. Push past into that infinity and search outside yourself.’

I have to confess that this blended science and mysticism usually brought about such a wave of cynicism in me that it would displace me from any deep meditation. But this time I found it within my grasp to transcend the flatland of reason and see the constellation of objects as something more than its constituent parts but linked on micro and macro scales. My own pulse was interwoven with those of the machinery that surrounded us like a fractal helix. The air conditioning's hum, the oxygen scrubber's ticking, the dripping of condensation on the outer wall of the bubble, and finally into the surges of current that flowed in waves through the copper network of the island's peculiar natural wiring – all seemed in tune. The disjuncture between spaces of perception made me giddy and soon I vomited as if trapped on deck in a heavy ocean swell. This was seen as a positive reaction and my colleagues began to move in rhythmic dances and make chanting calls in support. What was real and what was imagined no longer mattered as I was transported elsewhere.

My feet were the first to return to earth, but the cold Marbaline had been replaced by soft grass. The dry air was now a damp must, and the low hums of hidden filtration systems replaced by the heavy thud of machinery. In this place nothing was sterile. Everything was caked in dirt and grease, plants wound through buildings, tools, and insects seemed equal in their work. People moved around me, but only one of them held my gaze. All I can recall about them is that their eyes evoked dark pools of sympathy and unknowable oceans of fear and aggression combined in one. The

voice that spoke from behind them was unintelligible to me word for word, yet I comprehended its tone and intent fully. Holding up a fruit to my mouth it insisted that I tasted the flesh of the island and so I yielded in obedience. It was sweet and fresh, quite distinct from the reconstituted provisions in the bubble. Even the hydroponically cultivated fruit I had occasionally experienced in the city-state were pale in comparison. Despite this, its perfume evoked a confusion of warm memories of a home that was not my own, and the embrace of a family that I had never had. Beneath these lay the long extinct sense of hope for shaping a future. Those eyes continued to hold my attention while hands reached round my neck and tied a string on which an object hung against my chest, seeming to radiate a romantic sentimentality. The machine in the background began to whirl more quickly, speaking in its own punctuated beat. Then I felt cold Marbaline again, this time on my cheek and found myself prone with Alice leaning over me. She held my head, urging me to drink from a small vial. As soon as the bitter tang of the liquid ran over my tongue I was brought back to earth with a jolt.

'What did you see?' she asked, but I was not ready to share the vision. Quite distinct from a dream, the memory didn't fade but remained firmly lodged in my mind. Those dark eyes seemed to continue to look at me. I felt like I was studying myself in a mirror somehow. The return to the here and now was like falling from a tower, torn from the seamlessness of language in its purest form. So I remained silent until I could collect my thoughts, protecting

this secret. And until I agreed to speak, the team put me in an observation unit, I suspect, to protect the company's property as much as to protect themselves. But ideas cannot be contained by hermetic seals and air filtration units.

Alice visited daily until I finally spoke. Between her visits I watched her and her team continue their ritualistic experiments as they tested their theories by constantly rearranging the reference objects in new combinations and reperforming their methodologies. But there were no further incidents like my own, and I once again become reaccustomed to the world as I knew it. Nevertheless I continued to imagine a new one. What the team seemed to miss was not the answer to a question, but the acceptance that the question has no answer. So when I finally broke my silence it was not to tell Alice what I had seen but to lead her to her wonder on the things she had gathered, to see them as a vibrant searching community in itself, an organism not a tool. Under my encouragement, Alice and her team became children encountering something new for the first time – that is, playing. Instead of asking what the things on the island did, they started to ask what they could be.

With this simple act I became the medium for this communicable pathogen of social space we call Janus. Up until then it had been conceived that language may be emergent as part of natural processes of evolution, but biology remained prone to the physical transmission of evolving genes alone. Distracted by the fear of

technology overrunning with its informational viruses, no one since the fall of Babel had considered what might happen if it was language itself that could be infected by exposure to those of another place or time. Pidgin vernaculars became chimeras that changed the very matter of our minds, thereby invading our bodies. Words as images, distorting our brain chemistry and releasing latent dreams of what was and will be. This infection was a search for hope, driving us to become discontented with their lot, and to rebel against the dictum of 'stay thou in your place' that had become the mantra of our supposed civilisation.

## Chapter four: concretisation

*Imprisoned by four walls  
To the north, the crystal of non-knowledge  
A landscape to be invented  
To the south, reflective memory  
To the east, the mirror  
To the west, stone and the song of silence  
I wrote messages, but received no reply*

I woke with this refrain cycling through my mind, its melody lost but with a metre that synced with the throbbing pain in my head. Reluctantly I opened my eyes to the bright sunlight. Rather than four walls there were only three. Instead of a crystal of non-knowledge to the north, the ocean view stretched out from my room's balcony. By my side was a half-drained cocktail. The pages of the upturned book I had been reading before falling into my nap had crinkled where they had soaked up the pooled water running down onto the table from my glass.

I'd spent almost a month in the spa. Frequent massages and hot springs, as well as esoteric forms of rejuvenation based in quasi-medical science carried out by real men and woman, had occupied my time, as had the real work of studying the journals of previous scientists who had visited the island before me. Research often seemed to unfold like this, a constant delay until the flurry of

activity required to bring it together as a deadline approached. There may be some oneiric underbelly to intellectual work, I thought somewhat idly, taking a mental note to think that through carefully later. But right now it seemed wasteful not to appreciate the view.

The spa lay on the mountaintop where the air was clean and sunlight clear. Below, billows of smoky fog congregated in the valleys, and then cleared again over the ocean. An extinction-level event had taken place almost three generations before, decimating the flora and fauna of the island. But it had gone through something of a rebirth since, its nature and culture rejuvenated. The few remnants of organic life that had survived the extinction had rapidly mutated, adapting to survive at a rate that defied genetic evolution's usual generational pace. Bacterial forms had bloomed turning water and sand a vermillion red, their cells giganticised to be macroscopic. Other more complex organisms had responded by miniaturisation – birds barely bigger than cockroaches now found niches within the fragile ecosystem previously unimagined. Meanwhile the unusual infrastructure of copper wiring on the island had provided the resources for another form of monstrous colonisation, the ever-expanding market for tourism being perfectly suited to exploiting a pre-wired tropical land.

While it was undoubtedly idyllic in the confines of the resort, I yearned for some kind of distraction from the nostalgic image

constructed by the heritage industry. Everything here was framed and contained, at a distance. And so I conspired with one of the staff, a waiter with whom I had flirted over breakfast, to escape and visit the GEGONGDN, the island's museum. While all the tour brochures mentioned it as a 'must-see' destination, there seemed to be no way of actually reaching it. The normally fluent reception staff's English seemed to fail whenever I mentioned the place. My conspirator intimated that a scandal had engulfed the museum, and that a chain of embezzlement had left the island sinking in debt. Rather than see the project mosquitoed, the local community had rallied to maintain it as a place to exorcise the island's traumas, but the multinational tourism companies were afraid that the histories they told might put off customers, and so discouraged any visits. This intrigued me more, and so thanks to my charming waiter, I made my escape through a service entrance, and found a taxi waiting outside.

The vehicle was a rather jagged beast, somewhere between a scooter and a boat on wheels. One headlight was red and the other green, echoing the old conventions of sea vessels when the ocean was still navigable. Another nod to heritage I thought, starting to see the web of commercialisation spreading across Monstrado like the famous copper network. Once underway the taxi was clearly a bit of a jalopy, bouncing along on air pockets from its stuttering turbines as we wound our way down towards the township passing equally contingent enclaves of houses. At various points, wires and pipes burst out of the ground and up the sides of

buildings. Occasionally, water rose from the road hinting at the islands equally unplanned infrastructure.

The GEGONGDN museum abstractly echoed the vernacular architecture of Monstrado, raw concrete boxes stacked on one another jutting out in various directions. Inside there appeared to be no attendants so I set to navigating its map for points of interest. This proved next to impossible for the gallery plan showed a large white space simply bound by north, south, east, and west leaving me doing little more than hunting snarks, which I already knew to be extinct in these parts. So instead I followed my nose.

The first gallery was named Yi-Oh, a transliteration of the local argot. I believe it referred to the first world as the display cases held artefacts from the arrival of Europeans in the nineteenth century who had met a rather sticky end. After feasting on the island's psychotropic fruits, the crew of the *Saudade* fell into delirium that drove them into two factions, one declaring red to be the superior colour, the other siding with green. A battle had been played overseen by a scientist who acted as judge, jury, and occasionally executioner. With each round, the winners were decapitated and their heads stuck on sticks on a cliff. This was repeated until only the scientist remained, who somehow managed to behead himself and join the rest of the gruesome retinue. I couldn't help finding a perverse symmetry in this self-extinction with the collapsed civilisation of Easter Island. I'd been reading the extracts from the scientist's journal. He had dutifully recorded his

first intoxication by the fruit in a surprisingly lucid passage that belied the descent to savagery that followed, a descent better charted in his illustrations of plants that veered off into abstraction.

The second gallery I entered was named Pi-Er, translated as 'The Second Monarch', and referred to a possibly mythical machine that stood at the centre of indigenous life on the island. The Second Monarch coordinated but didn't govern. Most tribes or cultures we might consider 'pre-modern' would have revered it as a god, but on Monstrado it was not seen as transcendental - it simply was. The machine's autonomy gave it a sense of authority but not of devotion. The Second Monarch was, therefore synonymous with the movements of the seasons on the island, the world as a whole and the passage of the heavens binding them together as the tree of life would be to a pagan.

Although no proof of its existence had been found on the island, it appeared to have influenced a research team that arrived more than two centuries after the first. Practising psycho-science, it is claimed they had 'contracted' the island's ideology like a virus, then transmitted it to machines who globally converted from production of goods to the production of leisure thereby founding our current society. There were numerous theories as to what it was: a natural Babbage machine, the stenography of the gods, or a mediating device between dimensions. It was the last that seemed the most plausible to me, as on a certain scale and at a certain speed our space appears to be little more than an infra-thin surface



of a greater cosmic one. Regardless, it is said that the Second Monarch withered once its seeds had been carried away. And with it the island succumbed to its transformation.

The final gallery I walked through was named Jia-Ke. I read that this means false family, a concept that remained elusive to me but is essential to life on the island. Fortunately there was an invigilator, although the girl seemed to be guarding an empty room. On request, she gave a friendly explanation of how the GEGONGDN had commissioned an international artist to produce a monument to the machine. Their proposal had been to encourage discourse as a collectable medium. It was an intriguing notion, and its lack of spectacle gave way to curiosity and reflection as I realised that I too was engaged in the work. Bound up in the network of this exhibition I was part of this island's discourse simply by being there and asking my ignorant questions. Aesthetics were never my strong point and contemporary art, in particular, had usually troubled more than intrigued me. Still, the superimposition of foreign and local, or rather the indistinguishable nature between the two, resonated with my ethnographic training and as I left in search of the coffee shop I was able to consider how language, translation, nature, and culture, and all these apparent differentials productively congealed into a solid matter in the GEGONGDN.

As I sipped on a rather acidic brew I found myself running a keepsake through my fingers, something I had picked up in the

souvenir shop nearby. At once an adventurer landing on the island, a part of the hybrid tribe, and a tourist, my thoughts and memories were as knotted as a nest in a hedgerow. Perhaps this island is simply an exhibition, or perhaps it is a nexus of non-knowledge, memory, and silence.

## Postscript: towards an island taxonomy

As a curator I have found it increasingly difficult to view art in isolation. Instead my point of view, like many of those critically viewing contemporary art, has drifted to 'reading' the exhibition as a whole. This is not to devalue the individual work of art per se, but a tendency towards viewing art within a network of meanings – an ecology, of sorts, of an island one lands on when entering the gallery.

Whether written in lines of history in the museums of yesteryear or spatially as a more contemporary system of nodes, a key aspect of any exhibition is its narrative. This is a curatorial tool, and also a present condition of everyday life. Narratives exist in marketing. Embedded in products and brands as lifestyles, they organise our senses of self, as well as the world around us. The facts of history have been replaced by interwoven strings of stories. This is at least one of the ways in which curating has found itself so central to contemporary culture. The narrative may be as fictional as it is factual, but truth is there in a contingent state.

Among the most prevalent narrative forms in today's culture is science fiction, a broad genre that has its own evolutionary track. From its origins in the gothic literature of Frankenstein, through the golden and silver ages of futuristic space travel to the dystopian speculative worlds from Ballard to P. D. James, science

fiction is one of the few refuges of thinking about the future in the present. As a genre, it combines facts – genuine possibilities as suggested by scientific discovery – with pure imagination. There are phyla and subphyla of ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ science fiction; species and subspecies of gold, silver, and new wave SF, and the more recent speculative and climate fictions. All present their own distinct utopian and dystopian visions.

These forms of narrative are a theme, I believe, that emerges throughout Yu-Chen Wang’s practice. And, when invited to write a critical response to this exhibition, I took a creative writing approach to draw together a number of distinct ideas, some observational, some theoretical. It contains references to art, science, and literature, and the history of art, the history of science, and the history of literature. As a novelistic form it would be counterproductive and futile to explain it fully, just as it would be to ‘explain’ Yu-Chen Wang’s work. But some description of the form and content may be interesting to those curious and patient enough to have reached this point. In keeping with the scientific theme of the narrative, below are the beginnings of a taxonomy of the island I have constructed around Wang’s exhibition, or at least the narratives that run through it. In turn, I imagine this to be the unfinished catalogue of species that the first botanist left behind and the psychologist in the concluding chapter looks at in the museum.

## *Kingdom: Monstrando*

### *Alfred Russel Wallace*

Nineteenth-century natural scientist in part responsible for the theory of evolution having inspired published papers with Darwin prior to *The Origin of the Species*. He worked in the Amazon and Indonesia where the Wallace Line marks the division between two distinct communities of fauna with origins in Asia and Australasia. At the border of enlightenment thinking he remained committed to spiritualism alongside his scientific studies. He contracted malaria during an expedition and his diaries contain lucid and fantastical writing from bouts of the disease. He was an inspiration to Joseph Conrad who kept a copy of *The Malay Archipelago* by his bedside.

### *Alice*

Chief scientist in Chapter three, named after Lewis Carroll’s most famous character. There are further references to Carroll’s writing where nonsense is a method for confusing the boundaries between people with images and language, a feature that frequently runs through Yu-Chen Wang’s practice in the composites of machine and character – most notably the personification of linotype.

### *Blank map*

These appear twice. First, as the museum floor plan and, second, referred to in the story of our nineteenth-century protagonist being lost in the doldrums. It is taken from Lewis Carroll’s poem *The Hunting of the*

*Snark*. Obviously useless, it is also known as one of the first instances of image being used instead of language as a narrative device in a book.

#### *Island biogeography*

A subspecies of ecology that causes evolution, island biogeography looks at the effects of limitations on an environment on its flora and fauna. It is known that creating enclosures can cause small species to become large, and large species to shrink in scale to accommodate themselves within the ecology. This is due in part to limited gene pools and in part due to limited resources.

#### *Models in models*

The model within a model ad infinitum is a hybrid reference to the one inside Yu-Chen Wang's display, and tangentially to Lewis Carroll. In *Alice through the Looking-Glass* she encounters a map so detailed that she finds herself looking at the map marked on it, which renders it useless.

#### *Mostrando/Monstrado*

Name given to the island by the ship's crew. The original name is a hybrid word of the Portuguese *mostrado* meaning 'exhibition', and the old English 'strand' meaning beach. In the narrative, over time the name has corrupted to sound more like monster. A similar corruption is evidenced in the English word *demonstration*, which has its etymological roots in *mostrar*

#### *Saudade*

Name of the ship in Chapter one; a Brazilian/Portuguese form of nostalgia that is untranslatable into English.

#### *Sixteenth of a Persian rug*

This literary device is used by David Quammen in the introduction to *The Song of the Dodo*. This ecological essay talks about island biogeography and its affects on those enclosed within it, limiting biodiversity exponentially.

#### *Snarks*

An imaginary animal from the Lewis Carroll poem *The Hunting of the Snark*.

#### *Stay thou in thy place*

A quotation from a character in Edwin Abbott's *Flatland* warning the protagonist not to transgress his existence in two dimensions. Abbott's book is a satire on utopianism and social hierarchies, mirroring aspects of Wang's practice. *Utopia*, included in paperback form in Wang's display, is sometimes considered a foundational text in science fiction. The cover of her edition shows Bruegel's *Tower of Babel*, the story of which also interweaves architecture, language, and society on a utopian/dystopian axis.

#### *To the north ...*

The lyrics are taken from the poem 'Envoi' by Octavio Paz. However, it is included as a secondary reference, as it is quoted at the start of Henri Lefebvre's *The Production of Space*. In turn it locates the mirror that appears in Yu-Chen Wang's exhibition as part of the installation.

### *Vermillion Sands*

The pollution in the final chapter turns the beach and sea vermillion. This refers to the Vermillion Sands short stories by J. G. Ballard, a satire on modern society. This form of speculative fiction is considered 'new wave' science fiction, and Ballard was one of its chief exponents, exploring the psycho-social sphere. It is the genre-space of the final chapter.