

MARTIN KOVAN

An Island Emissary

I

Heat refraction makes the shoreline seem unreachable. Stretches of ochre break up, like bad reception, amid a deep green of vegetation. From aerial pictures he's seen the island skirted by sand, in places a wide expanse; a buffer between the sea and the interior. An epidermis, keeping the alien part of the world out. Hours of online perusal show him its contours and strangeness, the way the island occupies a territory—and exists outside it.

There's also old footage of the island-dwellers. Tautly muscled, short, black-skinned men and women, bright-eyed, assiduous, gather coconuts at the shore. Wearing bark loin-strings and head-bands, they are insouciant; the men carry daggers on hip-belts. They look like athletes; possibly extra-terrestrial. The film is grainy and almost oneiric. The footage is sub-titled, *The Only Successful Meeting with an Iron Age People*.

They appear self-interested—a word that has no meaning, is not even a description, on their island. Perhaps they're only hungry? In the film, a man in a t-shirt, one of the researchers and a rare visitor, distributes the coconuts from a small boat. He bobs up and down, hands held wide apart—a saviour posture, to show he comes bearing peace as well. Peace and coconuts, a sure-fire strategy. Trying to be their friend, he seems unaware that the people pay his eager bouncing no attention. The camera pans sharply to the side, and the man, with the coconut gatherers, is gone.

The island is a place set aside, belonging but apart. From the aerial photographs he's chosen a point of access, neither too close nor distant from the leaf-cover, and directed the fishing-boat towards it.

It's not his first attempt; but he can't repeat it, indefinitely. There's a time, under the sun, for everything. He's heard the summons: he and they belong, in the end, to the same warm molten heart, even if they don't yet know it. He might have come from far away, but not as a stranger.

The hotel-keeper in the port town has called him that, jokingly, just days before: a *stranger*. On the terrace, under the shade of a spreading poinciana, tourists ordered margaritas; he watched them drink, from another table. I'm going to the island, the outer island, he wanted to say—to all of them, sunken into cane chairs, made brittle by rain and sun.

The barman came and went, wearing a loose lungi, bringing the drinks as if they were ceremonial items. They invited him, the other tourist on his own, to

drink with them. He didn't deny them, or show them the Bible in his hand, clasped under the table. He let them wait, a little longer than they expected to, before saying he was saving his fitness for the following day—for an offshore expedition.

"And the destination?" one of the tourists ventured. A woman in a large hat, a rafflesia exfoliating in the shade.

"The furthest island," he said.

No-one said anything, not immediately, considering the distance meant. A long way to presume, alone, psychologically. How would anyone get there, and back again, without incurring the unusual costs?

"You can't get there. It's off-limits," one of the husbands lays it out—in public, on the terrace, for all to see. "Unless you swim," he tempers the reproach, chuckling. Others make the same, inane noise.

But who comes to the islands for swimming? Or, even, for moving? The palm-trees barely move, and never in the daytime, though one nods a little now. And what if the spirit should move one of them? Someone, let loose, to swim? But he doesn't contradict the man, a refrigerator, cooling off, to show he can.

"They called it that, you know, the British," he lays it down again, almost showing his hand, "because this was a penal colony. Just after the uprising—mid-nineteenth century, I believe. Dissidents, native nationalists. Left here to rot, basically."

"Who was here before the colony?" the woman asks, as if redundantly.

"Islanders, across the archipelago. Thousands—multiple tribes. There's less than a hundred, now, on that island."

The woman in the hat, who likes to look on distances, the more remote the better, says "It's their home, I suppose. After thirty thousand years." And adds, "The guide told us."

There's another pause. Ice shrinks, shamefully short-lived, in their glasses. The tree sheltering them is persuaded to shift its limbs, in the interval. "Why do you want to go there?" she asks him, the isolate with something hidden in his hand. She's more intrepid than the others, a kindred essayist of difficulty.

"Just to see," he says.

Rafflesia is ambivalent. "Why shouldn't they want to be left alone? After that. All that time."

Sitting apart, he knows it's not true. There's one invader they're unable, or unjustified, to repel: who comes with hand held out, like a beggar, in a supplicant's robe. So he'll be a beggar, and prove them wrong. What the drinkers don't know is that between men, who are strangers, and between men and women, stranger still, there's a bond that cannot be broken. And he'll show them it is so, without words, from that distance, so they can hear of the exploit afterwards, and praise it.

He's only an emissary, of the fact. But these people, like all people, need proof. That's what an explorer does: not merely going into unknown territory, but

bringing back the spoils of its wager. And what spoils! And what a wager! And the honour is all his.

He slept poorly, the first night in St Giles. Anticipatory anxiety, or just the mosquitoes, or the noise of young travellers in the courtyard, drinking, mouthing specialness, into the early hours. Children, really.

Or perhaps it was the most recent news, from Brussels, of a chemical attack, this one worse than the others; from Washington and London, which each suspect the usual “foreign infiltration.” Correct response, they want it known, will spare no effort of retaliation.

The news filters, remotely important, into the Indian Ocean. It has been fore-ordained after all, and whatever is to follow. He lies awake, gazing at shadow-fins of the fan, circling the walls. He’s amazed by the pride of the loud voices: young men, inflated from local conquests, or epic beer and whiskey binges. Young women, of good works left behind them, all across the archipelago: between the meeting of the races, the prophylactic wisdom of escape-clauses. They practise charity like a prudential coitus interruptus.

What would anyone know about *great exploits*?

No-one need know, beforehand. On its way out, the boat must evade the port authorities. If not, the fishermen face a penalty: their guilt will be on his shoulders. He’s planned it for the night-hours, when even the coast-guard is unguarded. First the longest part, all through the night, in the boat, with the fishermen; then alone, in the canoe, right to the shore.

He’ll wait until sunrise for the last stretch: an ascent, like climbing a sacred mountain. Not just for its height, but for what he expects to find on its summit. Thus did the Lord lead his flock to the highest pasture.

He thinks, breathlessly, of the two other fishermen—some years before, perhaps friends of his own fisher friends. Accidental visitors, their boat drifted loose during an overnight mooring; axed to death, probably in their unmoored sleep. Afterwards, when a helicopter approached to retrieve their bodies, the people held it off with bows and arrows. The dead fishermen hauled up on bamboo poles to ward off all comers.

He tries to pray, so sleep will find him that way, in the midst of gratefulness. Eventually, with the boosters carried in still on the stagnant air, he’s released. Apart from one or two fishermen, there are none on the island who know, or perhaps could even guess; the night trusts in them, like blind guides through the desert. They wait for the U.S. dollars coming to them, though they don’t come to much, shared between three. But the foreigner might do anything, while they sleep, might try to commandeer their boat. No-one doubts the journey’s foolhardiness, and fools are sometimes the worst danger.

He might be possessed, or deluded, even if he is a Christian; there’s safety in numbers. In good faith, he’s already handed over a couple of hundred, half the fee; for a fisherman, that’s not nothing. But for a fisher of souls—next to nothing.

II

The island has never known a Nokia ring-tone. No electronic pings alert fireflies; it hasn't even heard a gramophone. A portable radio once washed up on shore: bakelite dials encrusted with miniature barnacles, salt grown into diodes and compacted springs.

Freighters, on the horizon, keep a wary distance; the island border grows wider, as the world recedes. At one point, after tsunami, the deep floor undersea is lifted; the island rises over a metre higher. Coral reefs meet the air for the first time; shapeshifting into land or shallow lagoons.

Sometimes water seems to be lapping right to the threshold of the first dwelling; the sound of small waves is never far away. Freshwater, further inland, runs from a rocky cleft, over a pebbled bed; they take water away in skin panniers. Killed animals—grouse and small, wild boar—are ablated there and skinned. The water has never stopped running; animal offerings are never denied it, the place it comes from, its unseen source.

There are other remnants in the interior, so that patterns, if not relic stone walls, persist. Small domestic fences come with property, an apportioning. On nearby islands, where cells and partitions once stood—marked-off holdings for the treasonous, or recalcitrant—there's only fragmentary record of how many were kept, or how many never left.

Only rarely does anyone come, within view, to the island. It's been over a decade since the last unfortunates were quickly dispatched—though the islanders don't count the time in years, or see these as unlucky. Sent not across the sea, or back to where the shoreside bars of the port-town pulse with music, suspended TV screens keeping score on sporting events, the attacks in Paris and London. They were sent to the world beyond.

Do the tribespeople terrorise, in their own way? In St Giles, he's lain awake and tried to reason out their desire to be left alone, with their belonging to his own, true, flock. How will he tell them? No other people speak their language. The researchers have never had the chance to learn its rudiments: the word for *fish*, the word for *save*. Save them from what? A tribe can be saved from tsunami, or fire, or flood, but what else is there to save it from—itself?

The first thing that he can offer them, he thinks, is a fish: an anointed creature of the sea. That the people have perfected means for procuring their own is something on which he doesn't dwell. Their fish is something pulled up from an ancient darkness; his is new, something blest, pulled up from revelation. He can see them, transfixed by a novel awe, beholding a fish as they have never, in over thirty thousand years, seen it. But it's only the last two thousand that have mattered.

For decades, no-one has seen them at their daily lives; he imagines how they go about, if they're naked, how they cook and wash, how they make love, under shelter, or in the open, among the others, or what love means to them: surely not just an animal transaction. How does it show between them? If he can tell their sign of love, they might let him pass into their domain.

But my love must be greater than theirs, so that they're overcome by it, as a flashing of His sun.

As they keep to their isolate place, he barely moves from his room: resistant to outsiders. Between worlds, now. He speaks to one of the men who will take him fifty kilometres by sea; sometimes the hotel-keeper, but no-one else (not the young, booze-blind travellers). Tourists, flying in from Bangkok or Berlin, might carry the usual flus and infections—enough, he's read, to carry away the tribe. He must make himself pure, as a vessel is, to bring the only cure.

In the trees birds shriek and swing through darkness; they might have flown to the port from the island. The gate (how He has shown him!) is straight, as narrow as the shaft of pallid light coming from the terrace and its foreign party-goers, frenzied as the forsaken, deep underground. And he's already lost his passport (God's work, everywhere); the trip could be one-way, in any case.

*

On the first day they see him coming, in his own canoe, when it's still early in the morning. The sand is heavy after rain, all the drift come ashore. He's without a face, emerging from muted sounds of waves, no frigate birds heralding his arrival, alone on the sun-hit surface, a tunneller of time.

They haven't seen him before, the blank smudge of his face, the noise coming from it, indecipherable, yelping, a kind of macaque, paddling in the rhythmic beating of intention, a rounding moon come under the daytime sun. It makes sense to meet him, also by canoe, going there halfway across the gap, to give, to take. He calls out again across it, a monkey unable swim, something to draw laughter from them. Who has seen it before, a macaque in a boat, alone, coming from the middle of the water! A lost spirit, without a guide, any companion, any teacher, any tribe. What does he have to give, all alone?

They gaze at his approach, his monkey's song coming closer, and start off in their canoes to meet him. He's off-course, dragged by the tepid waves, but unconcerned; the mission is outside of time. But there's also human time: it shows the same face, the same men's and women's buttocks, turn and show him its back end, show him its front, flip genitals so he can see clearly the common thing inbetween. He can stop yelping, now, out in the gap between times.

They don't know Him because they exist, now, in a time before Our Lord did.

There are spears in the hands of the younger men in the canoes, raised to the newcomer—raising his hands now too, berserk sounds breaking from his pale

mouth. His face is contorted, a bad spirit rising. Brandishing a leaf-block in his hand, pointing to it, chattering and leaning from his boat—a fish in the other hand! He's close by, dark hair on his face, black demon's eyebrows, eyes keen and fearful as deer's eyes. And the simian mouth grimaces, sings a gargle-music, but smiling as he puts the fish in the water and pushes it to them—

The people sing to him too, a higher-pitched shrieking song, he supposes a mimicry of his hymning. Their hands also active, they could be admonishing or admiring him, and if they mimic his worship, how could it be in mockery? They've never learnt even its possibility, and when they flip their dark, thin penises at him it's not a mockery either, or when they turn and show him their smooth, globular haunches, or the women their firm or flapping breasts. Is that what they want of him, that he stand in his canoe and pull down his pants, shake his penis and flash his bare buttocks at them? Is it the sign he needs from them—of trust, and acceptance? Is this how they show those things, here?

He takes them in good faith, even when they begin to laugh, after a strange silence, as if something has changed in them, a turning in their hidden group-tide, that could be hostility. Is he really meant to show his bared body? Or would that show disrespect? Do they mock him after all? He has no idea; his reason loses its bearings. There's a boy with a bow and arrow, trained towards him, as his voice falls away.

They're suddenly subdued, perhaps to take him in differently, or because they want to end the meeting. It might be he needs protection, now. There's none higher, in heaven or on earth, and he holds it up to the boy with the bow, and calls His name again, that it may enter into them.

Who's attacking whom? The boy lifts the bow and fires an arrow straight at the interloper, to the leaf-block held up at his chest. An animal fit for felling, nothing more!

He knows it is His grace, and that there is none higher, keeping the arrow from his heart—God's work is everywhere. And so another piece of proof. The arrow embeds itself in the pages of His mercy, but he pulls it out, its iron tip inarticulate, and offers it back to the boy. Pulled from Holy Writ like the thorns from His perfect head. He bears them no ill-will, they'll let him return now, safely, back to the inbetween. In his return he traverses epochs; the water, the island, the boat, are mere props of the passion. He's never felt more gifted, with love and elation.

He'll return to them tomorrow, and the next day, and the next. Until they shall be in His possession, and in possession of His joy. And so will His work be done.

III

On the boat the fishermen tell him he shouldn't return there. "You break the law," they say, as if it were a new piece of information. They can't play their radios or their music, or send out signals, to avoid detection. He's paid them the full fee; it isn't their place to complain now.

He shows them the Bible, punctured with the island arrow, a message from the Palaeolithic.

"Bad news!" they exclaim. "We go back tonight," they repeat. "Under cover."

The work isn't done yet, he tries to explain. A few days more, one or two, is all He needs. "Trust me!" he says, infectiously; they warm to his constant goodwill, when what he really means is trust Him. They must see how happy, how blessed, he is.

Overnight he labours over his journal, while the boat shifts in the mildest breeze. They're out there, somewhere, not far away. He would paddle there by night, if the moonlight was stronger. The fishermen stay up for some time, playing cards and talking in low voices. He eats sardines out of a tin and drinks bottled water. He should fast, to be ready.

In his soul, he's never felt stronger: the omen of the Book, penetrated by time, gives him cause to be confident, if not pause. His very Word, touched by iron! On the deck he can hear one of the men, pissing over the stern. It sounds paradisaical, an angelic outpouring. He can see visions of a garden, the one in which those people live, if they only knew it. Showing him their private parts, proud, like Adam; shameless children.

They might be unsure what to expect of him, as children would be. They're confused, as semi-wild animals are, driven by contrary instincts. He has worldly gifts—practical, useful things—to offer them: fishing line, a pair of scissors, a soccer ball. He pictures them kicking it, on the beach, expertly.

There's a little nausea, starting deep in his bowels. He stops writing and lies on a thin mattress; a small wooden cross swings against the cabin wall, where he's hung it on first boarding the vessel. There's nowhere else, now, he's seen it all already. The others, travellers, the naïve ones, at this moment imbibing in the pier-side places: barking loudly over the last attack, the news from Washington, or from the space-stations, where the signals grow sharper. It's only a matter of time—for an epidemic, a blackout, an asteroid. These things have been fore-ordained, and they bring it all on their own heads. Who will have faith, if not himself? Who will prove His power, if he doesn't?

On the boat, in forbidden waters, he couldn't be closer to the real task; there is no other centre of the world. The sundered in Brussels, or Aleppo, are mere effects, epiphenomena. He knows the centre is here, in the Indian Ocean, two words hanging on an unseen threshold.

He gazes, eyes closed, at its enormity: tidal waves and flooding, vast forest fires and waves of planetary migrations, cities and their nerve-centres struck and ransacked, overrun with bandits, rats, cannibals. And all that is lacking is faith. He

can smile, safe in his own knowledge; the only thing lacking, and with it all could be reversed tomorrow.

All will be reversed tomorrow.

In the early hours he wakes, shivering, and takes some of the anti-malarials he's still carrying with him. Perhaps the beginning of a fever; and real hallucination, the night before, not just imagination. He seems to hear a remote thrum of helicopter rotors, approaching from the night. The sea is sighing. The men are in repose, pagans made of a venal marble; brides and bribery inhabit their dreams. There are women, far off, giving themselves to men in high-rises. Airplanes sough through the empyrean, inexhaustible sharks of the sky, rising, sinking. All the world moving, out of its own orbit. He can hear the music of St Giles—nursery rhymes and fairy tales.

The islanders, asleep in bark lean-tos. Civilised little fences; cooking pots of aluminium, kept from earlier, alien contact. A handful of families, huddled and hovering in astronomical time. Protected from the outside—just to preserve their species. Is that what God intended—that we just replicate ourselves, not in His name, His image? Reproduce our kind, like ferrets, or rats, or mongoose?

He is cold, disoriented, as if he orbits stratospheres. Let me give them to you, Lord. A gift of your own gift.

He goes out before the other men have woken, in the same canoe. He takes care not to splash in entering the water; everything is ready. He has eaten: the wine, the wafer. Dizzy, a little, with fever.

The water is blinding, a depthless blue, as every day, in creation. He knows it won't be long before he sees them again, on the horizon, flashing their parts, unobscenely. They're black, as the blackest Africans; he knows a tribal song he can sing to them. He isn't nervous, even with the nausea hostaging his system.

Will he, by now, be spoken for, have they sent out a search-party, in St Giles, or the other islands? He's an escaped man, already. No penal colony, for him, no little pent-up retribution. No circles of hell, no bogey-men, no monsters.

He can see them, as if already waiting. The men, the younger boys, no women. He paddles, it might be in slow-motion. The heat-haze makes the shoreline an imprecision. He paddles into an opaque blankness, their dark heads bobbing like puppetry. They wait for him, knowing he would be coming. No-one knows their language, not even their neighbours; he hasn't been at fault, he'll sing to them, again, even if they start laughing.

Who are they, on the other side of the water? Animals or angels, something inbetween? Is he any different? A matter of kind, or just degree? The sweat beads on his eyelids, it's hot already. The place is called the Indian Ocean, but it is really neither. What threshold, what way into the future, can ever be named? And given by whom, who can't see beyond it?

They're coming to him, he can see it, more eager than the day before. They'll offer him a woman, and make him stay among them. Or elevate him into a

deity. Or raise him on bamboo poles, dead as a scarecrow, as they did the other men, some years before, to warn the unwary.

But they're a practical people; from a foundered ship they took scrap iron, from the researchers aluminium, and coconuts, as they needed them. It's only human. From him they'll take his faith in them.

They're only God's children, as he is, divine in not knowing. He can see the rich green of leaf-cover as it reaches to the shore, and the islanders, gambolling and playing, in their incomparable Garden. There's nothing between them now, to come in their way. He goes to them—a lover, to his maker.