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POETRY

**In the Shadow of a Palm Tree:  
Poems from the Indian Ocean Territories**

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**Margin I**

*Cocos (Keeling) Islands*

Like rain inversed  
tiny droplets of fish  
push into air  
showering toward  
high cloud

this place belongs  
to itself  
you arrive on its terms  
remain  
terrestrial    peripheral

life is tenuous  
here on the merest  
suggestion of soil  
that contracts

expands  
with the lagoon's  
slow exhalation

a rhythm we all  
wait for  
live by  
days poised  
on the rush of its breath.

## Margin II

### *Cocos (Keeling) Islands*

What does it mean to live,  
subsist, just a moment  
above the ocean  
where the slow coral  
grows its mighty mountain  
and life explodes as  
its o-mouth meets the air

All night I hear  
the sea's secret undoing  
and all day witness  
uncountable beings  
rebuild

Some early evenings  
when the sun is stirred  
into the trees  
and the water returns  
to reclaim its margins  
we are still

Only then  
will clear crabs peer  
with above-water eyes  
- perfectly between -  
like sharks setting sail-fins  
to the sky

Here  
the water's surface  
looks like something  
you can trust  
the statement of  
its reflected surface  
is sure,  
promises we belong  
above.

## The Haunting

### *Christmas Island*

On our island, the young girl's ghost  
curls beneath the nightscape

By the toilets, the young girl's ghost  
has some in tears

On our island, what's by the toilets  
stops men leaving their rooms  
on our island, by the toilets  
a tiny ghost

On our island, behind the wire  
between the guards the Afghans see  
a girl's ghost by the toilets  
her unwet tears

Men will not leave  
their cramped and rotting dorms  
cannot stand to hear the sound  
of her suffering.

### The Politics of Entry

Coming in the back door  
like you could wait politely at the front one.

Coming in the back door  
like survival was a party, you're just not invited.

But in all this  
namelessness  
we are blind  
to the coming from;  
coming from a landscape in shadow  
where rape is tactical, procedural, political,  
*hold the daughter still*  
plant your flag in that dark place,  
force the life out of her eyes until she  
is pregnant with the violence of it.  
Let despair grow round  
and firm and hungry.

We say; the welcome mat,  
red carpet, flood gates open  
when all you see is light  
from darkness  
a door  
ajar

## The Will of Water

### *Cocos (Keeling) Islands*

*Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing,  
there is a field. I'll meet you there.  
When the soul lies down in that grass,  
the world is too full to talk about. (Rumi)*

Out beyond the reef  
beyond the horizon, beyond  
the breakers  
there is a space  
that will break  
that will break, that will  
unmake you

out beyond the breakers  
beyond borders, tankers, customs  
freighters  
out beyond eyes  
beyond sight and the light  
of conscience

hear the timbre of strain  
sing a low, sad song  
this vessel was never meant  
to contain  
such weight

out in the middle of  
*we will decide who comes*  
and in the thick of *the circumstances*<sup>1</sup>  
every fear  
of each imagined ending  
will engulf you

and the sharks  
of our dark hate will  
at last consume you, for  
we are a land that will not  
a line that will not  
a law that will not  
give

out where mothers  
are grasping for children's limbs  
we are losing patience with pity, turn away  
we will not witness, it will not stick  
for we did not see  
heard no screams  
let me wash my hands in the  
they are not my deeds in the  
I know nothing of the  
will of water

out beyond the ocean  
and all its undoing  
you had a dream. I will meet you there  
for when life is at last allowed its living  
the world will be too full  
to write about.

Renee Pettitt-Schipp ([renee.schipp@postgrad.curtin.edu.au](mailto:renee.schipp@postgrad.curtin.edu.au)) lives on the Cocos (Keeling) Islands where she writes and teaches Art to the Cocos Malay and mainstream students. In 2010 Renee was short-listed for the Trudy Graham Biennial Literary Award, and in 2011 and 2012 she won and was highly commended in (respectively) the Ethel Webb Bundell prize for poetry. Renee is currently completing her honours in Creative Writing at Curtin University.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Former Prime Minister John Howard in his election campaign policy launch in 2001 famously stated: 'This campaign more than any other that I have been involved in, is very much about the future of the Australia we know and the Australia we love so much. It is also about having an uncompromising view about the fundamental right of this country to protect its borders. It's about this nation saying to the world...we will decide who comes to this country and the circumstances in which they come' (Immigration Museum, 28 October, 2001, <http://museumvictoria.com.au/immigrationmuseum/discoverycentre/identity/videos/politics-videos/john-howards-2001-election-campaign-policy-launch-speech/>).