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CRUISING INTO COVID

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Cruising into Covid

When thinking about the focus of this issue of *Axon* on 'natural, environmental and epidemiological disasters' it would be hard to go past COVID-19, not only because of its topicality but because it fits all three adjectives. The possible exception is 'environmental': while the virus is a feature of the very air we breathe, in many parts of the world it has reduced air pollution and opened up previously prohibited spaces to the animal kingdom. Monkeys run amok in Thai towns, dolphins leap higher than normal in the ship-free Mediterranean around Malta. For almost anyone alive today the virological crisis is the most extraordinary experience of their lives — arguably more threatening than any of the wars with which it is analogised.

For English language writers and readers it's not an actual war that might most readily be recalled, but a novelist's. In HG Wells' 1897 classic *The War of the Worlds* Earth's citizens are powerless against the invading Martians, but when humankind is at their wits' end the Martians start falling, one by one. Their immune systems cannot fight the pathogens in the Earth's atmosphere. This sounds startlingly apt for the present time, except that we are the Martians. As I write, the blandly named COVID-19 virus has given the world's population a fight for our lives, serious worries about economic collapse, a new notion of heroes and heroism, debates about individual rights versus state control, concerns with mental health in a quarantined world, the sudden loss of globalisation, and restricted forms of social interaction for the foreseeable future.

It is a situation that has hurt certain sectors of the economy and society much more than others. While some singers, actors and others have been bravely inventive, it has created a crisis for the performing arts, but has had much less effect on literature. I say this as someone who was having a new poetry collection launched in May 2020; the launch is impossible except in a rarefied, digital way, but there's no doubt that reading has become a more regular and more important activity for most people.^[1] It is a situation in which creativity seems more important than ever, personally and, although it seems ironic, socially. Writers are used to long periods of solitude at home, and many of them actually crave it. Creativity helps, in any period of confinement; reading and writing are much healthier and more substantial than the videos of dancing in the driveway or feeding the dog that

occupy so much of social media at this time (and perhaps at any other time too). It's not the silliness that makes these things seem narcissistic — a certain amount of silliness is necessary at any time of life — but the lack of imagination and exhibitionist importance attached to them. They do show that we humans are generally social creatures; rarely has Satan's realisation in *Paradise Lost* seemed more pertinent: 'The mind is its own place, and in itself / Can make a heav'n of hell, a hell of heaven' (Milton 1966 [1674]: 254—55).

Carefully considered individual experiences might be valuable for all of us; this is after all, the very stuff of literature. Journalism and history give us the broad information about contemporary and passing human life, but it is literature that provides the visceral sense of experience which is integral to us as human creatures.

So where were my partner and I when the coronavirus really hit? Dear Reader, we were on a cruise, the first significant one either of us had ever undertaken. Until recent years cruise ships carried the image of luxurious holidays, with wealthy people dining on haute cuisine while big bands played swingingly as they sailed between New York and Europe. Even the *Titanic* has come to represent romantic melodrama more than tragedy, while the sinking of the *Lusitania* and other ships is almost entirely forgotten. In recent years, popularity, competition and technology have combined to democratise cruising, with enthusiasts among young people and superannuation-boosted retirees. One of my cousins went on a cruise when young and has now long lived in Turin, married to the trombonist who was the leader of the ship's band. Alas, my partner Annamaria and I are in the retiree category; except that writers find retirement impossible.

Time and tide drew us in; this sailing promised 45 days from Singapore to Tilbury Docks in London, with 24 different stops along the way — 24 different places without having to lug and unpack suitcases, and there was never to be more than four days in a row at sea. The places included some we thought we'd never see: Luxor in Egypt, Petra in Jordan, Jerusalem and Bethlehem ... Two more nights in London — a sort of debriefing for our sea legs — then a flight home.

For some, the idea of being on a ship gazing out at the wide, wide sea could constitute a fear, perhaps even a fear of boredom. Somehow for me the opposite is true, perhaps fed by a childhood reading of Robert Louis Stevenson so wonderful I still remember it, and later of Conrad and Melville. There is something existential about the fragility of a ship on the otherwise empty water, in a natural realm that is operatically beautiful, vastly attractive yet not our element. These are features of Conrad and Melville's novels and stories, in which the sea sometimes seems a stand-in for God or Destiny.

Before we left, news started dribbling in of a terrible disease in China, then in South Korea, then a few victims in Singapore after a visit by a South Korean church group. We signed up to the Federal Government's Smart Traveller service. Days before we left we learnt that Israel was closing its borders to cruise ships. We emailed and rang the cruise company repeatedly, with no response until they finally said that they still planned to dock there as the situation might change. Indeed it *did* change, but not quite in the way any of us expected. Before we left we also checked with our doctors; the last thing my doctor said to me was 'Enjoy your trip!'

So on 7 March we flew to Singapore, uneventfully, with nothing out of the ordinary except that the

Qantas flight was only two-thirds full. In Singapore Airport the Immigration queue was thronged with people, and checking was slow. On the bus to the hotel we had our first, brief sense of the brave new world, at a time when Australia, like every other country, had not realised what it would have to deal with, and Scott Morrison was still going to the football. The patriotic Singaporean guide proudly told us that Singapore was originally number 3 on the list of coronavirus case numbers but now was 15. We visited Little India, had lunch beside the river at Clarke Quay and dinner in Holland Village, and felt quite safe. There were no proximity restrictions, and sanitiser was everywhere. There was no sign that Singapore, despite its small population and strong government control, would be the first country to be thrown from apparent success to second wave deadlines.

On 9 March we boarded the *Vasco da Gama*, and the ship sailed at 11pm that night. We slid out happily, with Singapore's lights glimmering behind us. Our passage was up through the Malacca Straits, first stop Penang, Malaysia, in two days time. Little did we know what straits we would be in.

The ship held about 1,000 passengers and 550 crew. The passengers, mostly Australians, Kiwis and Brits, were elderly enough to make us feel younger than usual. Also slimmer than usual, although shipboard meals and laziness can make that change. Some looked fairly frail, hobbling on crutches or walking sticks, with at least one in a zimmer. A compulsory lifeboat drill was held the first morning; we thought that if the boat sinks it had better do so slowly.

For those who have never undertaken an ocean cruise it may be useful to read something of shipboard life; it hardly resembles day-to-day activities on the *Pequod*. A sheet is delivered to your cabin each evening, outlining the next day's activities. Many are pretty much the same each day, with slight variations — a talk about the spice trade, craft and ukulele lessons, trivia quizzes, fitness classes in the gym, get-togethers for sewing, mahjong or cards, bingo, early morning Pilates, afternoon and evening films plus numerous concerts ... The morning quiz is so popular that all the seats in the lounge are quickly taken. All this is enthusiastically embraced by most passengers but it can seem like preparation for the Old People's Home or the Marx Brothers' *Monkey Business* (a film that wasn't screened on board).

It takes a while before we find that a violinist and pianist play three times a day (before an audience of six or so people); they are listed as 'A Touch of Class' and are never announced as one of the day's highlights. There's also a jazz (more or less) band and plenty of pop/rock concerts. We're lucky in that one of the performers, Puerto Rican Bryan Correa, is an exceptional musician — a brilliant guitarist who sings beautifully, everything from the Beatles to Johnny Cash to Andrew Lloyd Webber. It stuns everyone when he sings onstage with a young soprano; he has a superb tenor voice, and thereafter often mixes his rock songs with Puccini arias. He also has a great sense of humour, and whenever he appears draws a crowd.

It is a great time for reading. Most people settle into a routine. We read, do crossword puzzles, and go to many of the films (including a number we have seen before) plus Bryan's concerts and a handful of the others. The days are punctuated by meals much as they once were by church bells — breakfast, lunch and dinner a kind of secular call to prayer. The days are easy, and pass surprisingly quickly. We used to wonder how aristocrats of old managed to use up their time, but now we know. Some of us walk each day around deck six, oddly enough past one of the smokers' few permitted

spots, their determined unhealthiness a slight shock. We charge or saunter past as they perform their rituals of slow suicide. For me, eleven times round; that equals about five kilometres, and it gives me time to meditate. Wordsworth, Coleridge and Yeats did the same, as do contemporary poets such as Nandi Chinna (2014). Hazlitt amusingly reported that:

Coleridge ... liked to compose in walking over uneven ground, or breaking through the straggling branches of a copse-wood; whereas Wordsworth always wrote (if he could) walking up and down a straight gravel-walk, or in some spot where the continuity of his verse met with no collateral interruption. (Hazlitt 1970 [1823]: 60)

This ritualistic way of spending the time makes it easy to lose track of the days, as Robinson Crusoe found. However, at the beginning we are still in land-based thinking, and on the second day there is a jolt. The Malaysian government refuses to let us dock at Penang so we sail on to Phuket. One passenger has become ill with pneumonia symptoms. He or she — the rumour mill on the ship comes up with both — is taken off the ship to be tested for COVID-19. We are anchored off Phuket for 24 hours while this takes place. The tests come back negative, but then the Thai government insists on a second test. After 36 hours the captain tells us at morning tea that this test is also negative, and everyone exhales with relief and applauds. However, the government still won't let us into Phuket. We remain anchored: the ship is able to take on fresh provisions.

Each day the ship prints a brief newsletter drawn from the Australian and English newspapers (plus crossword and sudoku puzzles). The Australian one comprises four pages, of which the last two are about sport, even though none is being played. The ship's internet is feeble but Annamaria manages to send out and receive some Facebook messages. Through these means we gain some awareness of what is happening in the outside world. One by one the ports of call fall like dominoes, while we stare at the sea and distant Phuket. Eventually we will be glad that we never set foot there, as the ship remains virus-free. Nevertheless on Facebook Annamaria sees vitriolic abuse of cruise ship passengers — 'Cruise ships are seen as the rats of the sea', 'Sink all cruise ships!', 'I was wondering why the Australian Navy does not sink all cruise ships'. In fact the great majority of cruise ships are virus-free, and the accusers forget how rapidly the coronavirus situation deteriorated. It was only on 10 March that Smart Traveller advised Australians 'to reconsider cruise travel' and on 18 March not to travel. One Facebooker advises us to seek the blood of Jesus and put it on our cabin door: that will protect us. I look around the ship but all I can find is tomato juice. My son, a winemaker, later tells us that 'microbially it would be a bit iffy' anyway.

My morning meditative walks at least produce a first sea-bound poem; it comes to me gradually, unforced, and is less visual than most of my poems, reflecting the pleasant emptiness of the days. The lack of pressure means that experience is Proustian; it takes place almost entirely in the mind, a kind of weightlessness:

Adrift

We loll about on a languid,

isolated island, kept in comfort,
kept from any shore, with a great
yawn of deep water listlessly,

ceaselessly lapping at the hull
quietly rock on a torpid sea
pointlessly. No country will have us.
Sunshine licks the decks avidly,

as persistent as the hours;
every day heat bakes
a birdless sky. Land,
that is our element, looks

both near and far. No television,
no radio, the wireless internet
as slow as time. But
a helpful Facebook message

tells us just to put
the blood of Jesus
on our smooth cabin door.
I look all around the ship

but the best I can find
is tinned tomato juice,
which soothes us
no end. Elsewhere

on every land, in every nation
life is eaten by a virus
that spreads like air. While we drift

casually, a modern *Marie Celeste*
economies fracture, desperate doctors,
and governments incredulously fall

and we all marvel that all this
could be done by something natural,
invisible, and unthinking,
something so small.

Only after WHO declares a pandemic does the captain announce that the cruise has been cancelled;
again, we all sigh with relief. When the ping-ping-ping that precedes the captain's announcements is

heard, the whole ship instantly falls into silence. The captain tells us that we will sail to Vietnam in order to transfer Australian and New Zealand passengers from another ship in the fleet, the *Columbus* to the *Vasco da Gama*, and vice versa for British passengers on the *Vasco*. The *Columbus* will then sail to London and the *Vasco* to Australia; the rumour mill speculates that this will be to Christmas Island, or Darwin, and it is some days before it is more precisely announced as Fremantle.

Quickly a second poem comes to me; there is a danger that, in a confined space with nothing but sea around us, the muse might produce poems monotonously the same; but I'm contented that this one is more general and in a different mode, something like that of the French *Symbolistes*:

Plunge and Rise and Sideways Lurch

Alert, out on the empty ocean
 a scribble of clouds in the pale sky,
 an alien, thin line, the rim of the world;
 everywhere an emptiness
 as fine as thought;
 a lacework of foam froths from the hull;
 in our blue-white wake, absence,
 absence, absence!

I've been reading, among other quite different works, some of Philip Larkin's letters home, and the poem probably owes something to a poem of his about places cleared of me, such absences — or some such. I remember it hazily and only after writing my own poem. TS Eliot said that bad poets borrow and great poets steal but I'm a poet who only vaguely remembers. Eliot's claim has always seemed self-interested to me, and I've never believed it. Worthwhile poems are written more out of the unconscious mind than the conscious. Now I look at it, my poem is about a general sense of absence, and isn't personal at all. The most important word is probably the first one, 'alert', and it portrays a delight in emptiness that the sea offers, and which no doubt sounds odd to most people.

I'm not by nature easily agitated and the poem's tone doesn't reflect the nervous uncertainty that a number of passengers feel. For we still don't move, and the torpor is a little like that portrayed in Conrad's *Nostramo* or *Victory*. While we are being looked after, the captain and his senior staff must be having a hell of a time, negotiating with head office in London, and with the Thai, Australian, New Zealand and Vietnamese governments. The Vietnamese seem to have changed their mind and he is now trying to work through the Australian Ambassador to Vietnam. Eventually all this fails and the transfer is to be made at sea, something the company has never done before.

My morning walks, less temperate weather, and the different passenger reactions give me a few more words:

Outlooks

Tiny water drops scroll together,
 clouds are hung like suspended waves
 while the ship spears the sea
 creating its own swell
 that surfs away from the hull,
 arcing and dipping, out
 into a vast, distant,
 incomprehensible, water-bound silence.

Everywhere roiling, dipping and rocking,
 unerring water, an image of elsewhere:

to some it signifies implacability, danger,
 uncertainty, something unsaid
 when voice is needed;
 to others possibility, the love imagined
 but not yet felt, every book waiting
 to be opened, another way of being.

All the things we cannot touch
 that exist only in invisibility,
 the ink-blue, make-of-it-
 what-you-will, inanimate sea.

Soon after writing the third poem I decide that the poems are variations on a theme, and so dispense with the second and third titles, and combine them as one poem in three sections. I never make such decisions through deliberative reasoning; they are as instinctively creative as the original writing. I always maintain that creative writing, even in a first draft, involves more critical thought than is generally suspected, and that editing involves more creative thought than is generally allowed. It's only when writing this essay that I can see how this last poem more outwardly expresses the delight in emptiness, a world outside our normal landlubber perspectives, that is implicit in the crystallised *Symboliste* 'Plunge and Rise ...'

In truth, I'm still not sure if they're better as one poem or three.

One morning we see the *Columbus* two or three kilometres away. The transfer involves a gangplank and a small ladder but even the frail passengers make it without tumbling into the water, thanks to the agile crew. The transfer takes the best part of a day, with lifeboats ferrying between the two ships.

The next day we set sail for Fremantle at last. Our arrival date keeps shifting, no doubt as local and national politics swirl about us. The ship slows its speed so that we berth a little after 5pm on Friday 27 March, docking just behind the disease-ridden German ship, *Artania*; it's WA's version of the *Ruby*

Princess. We sit in Fremantle until Monday morning, except for the New Zealanders, spirited to the airport late one night.

It's such a pleasure to see land, trees and buildings again. In the 18 days since leaving Singapore, no ports, no exotic towns ... All we've seen is the sea. However, it's even more of a pleasure to think of everything that the marvellous crew did to keep us virus-free: fumigating the dining areas at night, and disinfecting rails, lifts and counters continually. Out at sea, COVID-19 can seem a corollary of the albatross that the Ancient Mariner shot. A cruise ship that becomes infected is a death trap, but even though for a few days the *Vasco da Gama* risked becoming *The Flying Dutchman*, we were actually in one of the safest places on the planet. And in that place we did more waiting:

A Meditation in Time of Virus

A strangely lethargic Sunday afternoon
 given the time of such uncertainty.
 I stare out from an eighth deck café
 in a state of complacent anxiety
 at Freo, shops and trees not far away,
 so familiar and yet now so foreign.
 An array of buses queues below
 and police walk or sit with chagrin,
 bored and aimless, awaiting us.
 They have been there all day,
 bored and aimless; nothing happens, continuously.

In a time of virus, the contemporary plague
 we are promised separation, halfway
 between exile and leprous quarantine
 even though each of us is virus-free,
 our ship having sailed around and around
 to watery nothing: the sea is all we've seen,
 no tempting ports on our cruise to nowhere.
 Everything normal becomes oxymoronic,
 no tonic for all civilisation has sought
 as the world slowly shuts down, land after land,
 door after door, thought after thought.

'Freo' is the local abbreviation for 'Fremantle', and is meant to convey familiarity combined with estrangement. That was true in a dramatic way for Yeats during the Irish Civil War, and the title alludes, slightly ironically, to his 'Meditations in Time of Civil War' (2012 [1922]: 7–12). I say 'slightly' because Yeats's war was more dramatic but the battle with the corona virus might be more lethal,

and it certainly has the sense of a civil (internal) as well as external battle. I realise that I could be asked 'Why write the poems?' because I was asked that in a public interview about the poems I wrote in *Ahead of Us*, a book about my wife's experience of and death from cancer (Haskell 2016). I suppose it's a reasonable question but it's not one that would ever occur to me. Put on the spot I replied that it's just what I do, it's just who I am. Like poets everywhere, I suspect, it's simply or complexly my way of dealing with the world, and I think it's different from a prose writer's way. Poetry, I romantically believe, gets to the core of things, and more completely unites inner experience with outer, inner meaning with practical, real world meaning. Prose shows you how to survive in the world, but poetry is riskier, and isn't much concerned with survival.

Home but not home, we looked longingly at familiar Freo where the wharf was guarded by police. The thought of jumping overboard, swimming to shore and hitchhiking up the road to home belongs to a Jason Bourne film, but must have been entertained by many. But now we wait to learn when we will have our next adventure: quarantine.

More generally, the COVID crisis has evoked significant questions about ethics, especially about the balance between individual rights and state power. In liberal democracies our political philosophy sees state power delegated by the people and responsible to them. Dictatorships, and philosophies such as Chinese Confucianism (or at least a contemporary view of Confucianism; see, e.g., Hui 2020), view things the other way around. Crises have democratic governments assume more power; there is no time for such assumptions to be validated through the ballot box. Hence we see protests against lockdowns in the USA, Germany and other countries, and in Australia a good deal of wariness about the COVIDSafe app developed by the Federal Government.

Long before the app was thought of, the government decided that everyone arriving from overseas had to go into quarantine for 14 days. The West Australian government decided that interstate visitors would be put up in Perth city hotels, but for West Australians quarantine would mean a trip to Rottnest Island. Rottnest is known to West Australians as a vehicle-free holiday island but all the holidaymakers have been cleared off and bookings for the about-to-happen school holidays cancelled. The island actually has a history that mixes pleasure and horror, so quarantine with cute quokkas (the alliteration is irresistible) seems vaguely appropriate. The island, originally part of the mainland, was named 'Rottnest' by the Dutch explorer Willem Vlamingh in 1696 because he thought the quokkas were large rats. Noongar people know it as Wadjemup or Waadgemup. Australia itself was settled by white people as an island for prisoners, and from 1838 to 1931 Rottnest provided a mini-version. The island was used to isolate more than 3,600 Aboriginal prisoners from all over the State; more than 370 died there, some executed (see Green & Moon 1997).

We are not Aboriginal, and we live in more enlightened times, but we are still subject to state forces. On Sunday night we suddenly get a notice to have our suitcases packed and outside the cabin door by 10.30pm. We receive Border Force leaflets, luggage labels, wristbands and instructions, plus an accommodation map that tells us we will be in Cabin 852 at Fays Bay on Rottnest Island for 14 days. The whole cruise has been marked by uncertainty but at least we now know what will happen to us.

So Monday morning it's showering, early breakfast, final packing into hand luggage, checking of shipboard expense statements, and thank yous and tips for our cabin attendants before colour-coded

assembly in the ship's entertainment centre at 8.30am. We think Vasco da Gama never had to wear a coloured wristband when he sailed around the world, cutting off the ears of Indians and doing other things colonial explorers of his time thought reasonable (see Kooria 2017).

We don't know it at the time but we will wait in that entertainment centre for four hours. We leave the ship in groups of 20; having drawn green wristbands we have the pleasure of being in the last group. The whole process is extremely well organised but does have its idiosyncrasies. We whizz through Immigration, then collect our suitcases for a ten-second trip through Customs before handing the cases over again for transport to Rottnest later in the day. The checks are only cursory. Before being led to a bus that will take us to the ferry we are met by a genial Assistant Commissioner of Police. He reassures us that all the authorities know our ship has been and is virus-free, and that quarantine at Rottnest is meant to be more a holiday than a punishment. He also says that we'll be able to move around in our allotted area of Rottnest, which gladdens our hearts, until we find out that it's not true.

It takes a small army of people, all of them friendly and polite, to get us to the ferry and then off it at Rottnest. We have to observe social distancing while boarding the buses and ferry but no one cares where we sit once on board. Of course, we have been intermingling for 20 days while on board the ship. It's 2.30pm before we reach Fay's Bay and our cabin, taken there by another bus. We're told that we can't leave it, and we find security officers cycle past day and night to make sure that we stay put. The path to the beach is just over the road and we can hear the siren call of breaking waves but can't see them.

Quokkas hop gently around the cabin. Our neighbour has a black skink climb up her flyscreen door. Quarantine at Rottnest is quizzical: we're halfway between lepers and holidaymakers. The whole island is clean of the virus we believe, so it's hard to imagine that it would be dangerous to walk down to the beach or to swim in its saline waters. The whole business seems a waste of money and resources. A letter to the editor in the *West Australian* newspaper blames Premier Mark McGowan, but our understanding is that we've been caught in the Prime Minister's blanket rule for Australians returning from overseas. Bureaucracy doesn't deal in subtleties.

But it's hardly Hell's Island, and the cabins are more spacious than any hotel room. Food is delivered every day (left outside), the newspaper sometimes comes, we can place orders with the general store for next day delivery, the internet is hopeless but there's a tv and, unlike at sea, our smartphones work perfectly. Annamaria does an interview by phone with Gillian O'Shaughnessy for ABC Radio. Medical services call by to check on us, our neighbours are friendly, and we can talk across our patios. We have books, and are given a jigsaw puzzle to amuse us, plus exercises to do while cooped up. We are visited by wattlebirds with yellow feathers on their flanks, elegantly plumaged seagulls with distinctive polka dots on their tails, a very territorial crow, and at dusk a processional of bronzewing pigeons along the weedy verge, like faded capuchin nuns in a file. Annamaria learns from a friend that a wind turbine we can see from the kitchen window has its own Twitter account. No doubt it sends more intelligent messages than a certain president. A she-oak outside compellingly whispers like the unseen waves.

Like Thoreau on Walden Pond, meditative time allows much greater perception of your surroundings. Although we can't visit the beach or wander down the enticing lanes that fan out in all directions

around the cabin, we can open the front and back doors to the breeze, walk onto the verandahs to admire the full moon, and watch the weather coming in from the ocean horizon. Perth's lights twinkle enticingly at night, like Gatsby's green light across the bay, and I have never imagined how much I would enjoy seeing a newspaper. The coffee is lousy, as it was on the ship, and the food not much better; on days when the newspaper delivery fails or there is no fruit in the food packages it is important to keep a sense of proportion. I manage one more poem out of the experience, drawing on Yeats again; it's a poem in which the most important issue was to get the tone right, neither too grand nor too whingeing nor too celebratory. To do so I shifted its original free verse into light rhymes or assonance:

On Waadgemup (Rottnest)

Because we cruised South-east Asian seas
 in a time of virus, though we were virus-free
 we have been sentenced to funny quarantine:
 quizzical, frustrating yet strangely serene.
 No honey-bee hive or bean rows interrupt
 our Easter island, Rottnest or Waadgemup.
 An old cabin we have there: skinks slither
 and quokkas hop about in outside's weather,
 the outside where the law won't let us go.
 A beach path beckons, swallows and seagulls slow,

 then swoop. Life is matted into simplicity.
 Surf froths on a shore that we cannot see,
 the wind whispers and sings through a she-oak
 while scrubby mounds and sand denote
 our Knowledge of Good and Evil ground.
 Observing light shift through its phases beyond
 dawn to noontime sheen to sunset's blaze
 is the way we pass our listless, offhand days:
 the night hushes with the unseen breakers
 for us, half-lepers, half-holiday makers.

We expect to sit on the island until Easter Monday so it's a pleasant surprise when we get a note on Maundy Thursday telling us to have our suitcases left on the verandah by 8am. Good Friday turns out to be a long day with the buses late and everyone starting to break from their verandahs before they arrive, well into the afternoon. The ferry trip back to Fremantle feels like a slightly fraudulent drama, with paramedics on board and a television station's helicopter accompanying us. We embark onto the wharf — Fremantle again — with newspaper cameras clicking, Border Force and members of the army plus police surrounding us before we disappear into the sweep of family and friends. It

seems remarkably eventful considering that we've been where, in a sense, nothing happened. But we live in a time when nothing itself is something, indeed something to be profoundly grateful for.

[i] Publication was postponed so that the book, *And Yet ...* (Perth: WA Poets Publishing), could be launched before a live audience in August.

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