

# Our Island, Our Future

A zine of youth poetry  
from Christmas Island.



*Edited by Stephanie Niu*

the final 10 minutes of the 35-minute flight from Hobart to the remote airstrip at Melaleuca



First published in 2023 by Stephanie Niu  
and Christmas Island District High School  
Christmas Island, Western Australia 6798

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# Contributors

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Savannah Ma  
Selfia Dodi  
Matthew Sambell  
Ikram Norazman  
Danish Sharom  
Daniel Anticich  
Zia Vickers  
Rebecca Lee  
Maya Binti Shahran

...and six anonymous poets.

# Editor

Stephanie Niu is a Chinese-American poet and interdisciplinary scholar. In 2023, she lived on Christmas Island to complete a Fulbright Scholarship in History and to fulfill a dream of returning to the island that so captured her imagination. She is the author of two volumes of poetry: *Survived By: An Atlas of Disappearance*, winner of the 2023 Host Publications Chapbook Prize, and *She Has Dreamt Again of Water*, winner of the 2021 Diode Chapbook Contest.

# Introduction

When I began teaching poetry at Christmas Island's only high school, I think I was looking for hope. My ambitious syllabus for a four-week course reflects this: on the first day, each student in the Year 10 class received a packet of poems prefaced by the following question: *How can a poem be a tool for imagining a better future?*

On Christmas Island, the question of the future is being asked to everyone, not just youth. Phosphate mining, the island's primary economy and its reason for permanent human habitation, operates on a land lease that expires in 2034. As this deadline approaches, the island's precarity and the viability of its future has become part of public consciousness; "Our Island, Our Future" is the same language used in a ten-year strategic local government plan focused on diversifying the island economy.

As islands often are, Christmas Island is a microcosm of global forces that surround it on a compressed, and often accelerated, scale: speciation, extinction, sovereignty, cultural specificity, and natural resource management are just a few.<sup>1</sup> A formerly-volcanic mountain jutting out of the Indian Ocean 350 km south of Java, "The Rock," as some residents fondly call it, has borne witness to an astonishing human history of exploitative labour practices, collective power through a workers' union, and modern immigration detention in just a matter of decades.

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<sup>1</sup> Godfrey Baldacchino, "Islands, Island Studies, Island Studies Journal," *Island Studies Journal*, Vol. 1 No. 1 (2006), 3-5.

Living on Christmas Island amplifies the forces that contribute to its precarity. When heavy wet-season storms delayed freight ships starting in November 2020, the island's grocery stores sat with bare shelves for months as stock remained depleted until March.<sup>2</sup> Even when things run smoothly, cling-wrapped heads of red cabbage going for \$20 at the supermarkets remind Islanders of the tenuous and expensive connection to the mainland. Red crabs, which migrate every wet season in a spectacular river of clicking carapaces, are a living reminder of the importance of conservation and the inevitable damage that human occupation causes. Cars thump year-round over metal grates embedded throughout the island's roads, installed to aid crab migration and prevent the car-induced carnage that marked wet season for so many generations.

I came to Christmas Island in 2023 to learn more about the island's history, particularly of immigration and labour. It quickly became clear to me that understanding the past required asking about the future; often I learned as much about someone's connection to the island by asking about their hopes for its future as from asking about their past. I added the word "futurity" to my vocabulary ("the conviction that the part of the story one is living in is not and cannot be the whole of it").<sup>3</sup>

Asking youth about the future, then, felt like a natural extension of my quest to understand the island's past. And poetry felt like an approach to the future totally different from everything else that had been done. If strategic planning operates on analysis, historical data, and economic projections, poetry operates on image, sensation, and imagination. It is a direct line to dreams.

In truth, I chose to teach poetry at Christmas Island District High School for a simpler reason: I love it. Personally, poetry has always offered me a protected land of imagination where logic can go on vacation and pure image, pure sound can take control. Throughout the poetry course I taught in August and September of 2023 on Christmas Island, integrated generously by Kathy Shortland-Jones into her Year 10 English class,

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<sup>2</sup> Swell Weather Voyage Update 26/2, Zetner Shipping, 26 Feb 2021.

<sup>3</sup> Deva R. Woodly, "Conclusion: On Futurity," *Reckoning: Black Lives Matter and the Democratic Necessity of Social Movements* (New York, 2022; online edn, Oxford Academic, 18 Nov. 2021).

students read poems that reflected this quest for radical imagination from writers including Jazz Money, Louise Glück, Molly Brodak, Aracelis Girmay, Jeremy Radin, Li-Young Lee. Building on the strange worlds that only exist in poems, I challenged students to imagine outside of reality, to imagine the distant future.

Their alternate worlds startled me; they were not perfect worlds full of hope and restored land and shining sun, but of natural disaster, apocalypse, sarcasm, anxiety— worlds where rain flies upwards and puts holes in hands, where thoughts drip “like a slow leak in a bucket of honey,” where children “lock eyes with God.” In a prompt in which I asked students to describe in great detail the fictional beginning or end of the world, almost every student chose to write about the end. It soon became clear that the global forces magnified on Christmas Island— climate change, mass extinction, resource extraction and depletion— were forces that these fifteen- and sixteen-year-old students were imagining not past, but through. These clear-eyed poems see the world for what it is, and yet they continue. Yet, “yesterday has already arrived...and I am hoping for a longer jetty or another one.”

Once, after appearing overwhelmed by a generative prompt about the future, a student despaired, “How can I write about the future when I don’t even know how to write about now?” This is the question the island, and in many ways the world, must continually ask itself. I came to these young poets with questions about the island’s future, seeking answers in imaginative powers beyond my own. Their poems, full of intergenerational love, labour, romance, humour, ritual, and celebration, remind me that understanding what the island can become requires truly seeing what the island already is. These poems take risks; they move beyond English into Indonesian and Arabic; they play with whitespace; they address labour and intergenerational care through everyday acts like bush bashing and cooking; they break boundaries between interior thought and external expression; they dialogue with ancient texts. They sing.

Part of living in a remote community meant seeing students often outside of class. I knew that these students were already deeply engaged in the world, performing music for public celebrations, volunteering at the local cinema, serving calamari rings and beer at the island's only real cocktail lounge. Their writing reveals the clarity of their vision for not just the future, but for the rich tapestry of social and natural life already around them. Indeed, these are poems of hope. But the hope in this collection is not so distant from the present; it is alive in a grandmother "making the impossible possible as she walks slow," in "living plants bowing down," in a family on their day off laughing amongst rocks "that show their true colours when held against the light." These are poems of both witness and imagination, of grandmothers and deep seas and defying physics. With astonishingly clear-eyed voices, these young writers remind us that hoping toward the future requires acknowledging everything still alive in our present.

*Stephanie Niu  
Christmas Island, September 2023*

# Our Island, Our Future



# Thalassophobia

## *Emilee Chan*

*Why are you so scared?* My sister asks

She splashes the once-serene surface onto my scorching skin  
soothing and washing away the sand from the shore  
where I was searching for seashells in the sunlight.

A squeal escapes me as I was surprised at her sudden forceful embrace  
My body clashes with what feels like concrete then a cold blanket  
engulfs my entire being

I scream but nothing but bubbles break boundless

I glance up desperate for an explanation

What seems like a never-ending series of thunderous waves

crashing on top of me

breaking and surging and pounding

I'm being pulled into a world breathlessly unknown

*Why are you so scared?* I ask myself

as I face the relentless waves that seek to swallow me whole

for the ocean may test me, but I won't be overthrown

I'll rise above the fear and learn to call this vast expanse my own

*This poem relates to a core memory of mine with the ocean. As a Christmas Island kid, it is expected of me to have a good relationship with the ocean. However, that has not been the case until recently.*

***Emilee Chan***

## Sunday *Savannah Ma*

The sound of the trees swaying from left to right and left again  
The hot, tropical, humid blistering breeze  
The leaves fall making it feel like fall  
Covering the tides with nature's debris  
Listen to the laughter of children in their Billabong bathers  
Footprints printed on the hot, soft sand  
Piles of dark frosty multicoloured rocks  
That show their true colours when held against the light  
Screaming splashing sizzling  
Cars going up and down the hill  
Up and down the hump in the middle of the road  
Thumping of cars in potholes

Kree-Kree-Krrrt-Krrt-Krrt  
Creatures with wings circling above  
Walking along the boardwalk  
Parents telling the young ones to not go out too far on the reef  
Mums talking  
Dads chatting and cooking

One side calm  
the other rough

Bush bashing my favourite  
Four-wheel driving  
Long, hot, humid walks  
Beautiful destinations  
The typical family day out when dad isn't at work

*This poem talks about a day out with friends and family that happens rarely unless Dad isn't working. It shows the features of the incredible unique island that I live on and talks about the activities that can be done here on Christmas Island.*

***Savannah Ma***

## For Mama

As she grows in her steadfast heart  
She grows weak  
The number of grandchildren, sons, and daughters she has  
I wonder how much they worry about her?  
As she takes special care of every single grandchild  
She makes us all laugh with her memories while gently getting forgotten  
Then again, she makes us worry when she coughs or falls  
Some of her grandchildren, daughters, and sons are far away  
Some which can't come overseas to see her at all,  
So they call her and check up on *What's going on?*  
*Is she healthy? Have you eaten? I miss you! I love you!*  
Making the impossible possible as she walks slow and can't keep up with  
us anymore  
*Did you help with dinner, what did you make?*  
*I want it too!*  
*If you made my favourite I'm coming over*  
As they fly their plane overseas,  
Drive half an hour to Mama's house,  
They couldn't wait any longer they hugged and said their Salam's  
*Mama I'm here, Salam!*  
*Ooh, look how big you have got, Barak Allah*  
*How have you been?*  
*Alhamdulillah,*  
*Now what food did you make, I'm hungry?*

*This elegy is about my grandma (who I call mama) and relates to my feeling and everyone in my family's feeling, as we have to go overseas to see her.*

## Nenek's Cooking

The scent that dances in the air  
Tickles my nose with its MSG, herbs, and spices  
Nenek's cooking drags my feet downstairs  
The scent that dances in the air  
My mouth watering like it's a crisis  
My stomach grumbling  
The scent that dances in the air  
Tickles my nose with its MSG, herbs, and spices

*I wrote this poem because I love my grandma's cooking.*

## Island's Beauty

*Selfia Dodi*

Di luar,  
Saya melihat  
Dunia penuh dengan sesuatu  
Yang indah dan sangat ceria  
Where nature's beauty  
Always feels like spring  
It gives me a sense of serenity

The banana leaf gently sways  
As the light breeze passes by me  
And a bee buzzes its way through this charm  
No way I'm letting this get harmed

As the calm waves slowly come and go  
Their existence makes me feel at peace  
Bringing me freedom and calm

As the bright sun sets its way down  
The sky is lightly painted with pink and orange,  
Yang sangat cantik dan menawan  
Membuat saya jatuh cinta  
Kepada kesenian Allah  
Yang sangat lah indah.

## Island's Beauty (translation)

*Selfia Dodi*

Outside,  
I see  
The world is full of things  
That are beautiful and very cheerful  
Where nature's beauty  
Always feels like spring  
It gives me a sense of serenity

The banana leaf gently sways  
As the light breeze passes by me  
And a bee buzzes its way through this charm  
No way I'm letting this get harmed

As the calm waves slowly come and go  
Their existence makes me feel at peace  
Bringing me freedom and calm

As the bright sun sets its way down  
The sky is lightly painted with pink and orange,  
Which is very pretty and charming  
And makes me fall in love  
With God's art  
Which is very beautiful

*This poem is about how magical Christmas Island is and the serenity I feel living on this special island. I decided to include Indonesian language because Christmas Island is a multicultural island, and it displays my background.*

*Selfia Dodi*

# The Blowholes

*Matthew Sambell*

The blowholes are cannons of the past.  
Exploding raw power  
Far into the atmosphere  
Deep roars boom infinitely.  
A battle rages, each cannon fires.  
One after the other  
Showering onlookers with droplets of history  
Raining the ions of time.

*“The Blowholes” is a poem about how I have grown up seeing the blowholes as huge otherworldly guns which are infinitely powerful and thunderous.*

*Matthew Sambell*

# Amplified Island Auditory

## *Ikram Norazman*

The muffled whistling wind gives me goosebumps  
Balding the towering trees to bare bone  
Living plants bowing down majestically  
Woooh Whoosh

*This poem highlights the sounds associated with hiking through the tropical rainforest on Christmas Island, from the leaves that have fallen from the trees, to the smooth sounding wind and friendly birds.*

*Ikram Norazman*

## Lily Beach *Danish Sharom*

Lily Beach is where I thrive  
Lily Beach is where I find peace  
Lily Beach is where paradise starts  
Lily Beach is extraordinary  
Lily Beach is like a gift from nature  
Lily Beach is my favourite beach and nothing will ever change that

*I chose to write this poem because Lily Beach is a place on the island where I find peace.*

***Danish Sharom***

## An Elegy for My Perfect Girl

Playing games all day, all night  
talking for months,  
growing a new thing  
to look forward to every day.

She was good enough,  
perfect in fact,  
just for me.

“Mine” I thought  
but I’m too selfish.

She drifted away.  
*slowly losing her*  
She stopped playing games.  
*slowly losing her*

She stopped replying...

*I like this poem because it feels like something like this has happened to me before, but it really hasn't.*

## Ode to my Laptop

I forgot  
I didn't know  
but you think I didn't try my best  
and so  
the late nights,  
early mornings  
my yawning at sun's dawning  
were worthless  
sought out before this  
and through my time in which I try  
in which constricts my mind  
spirals like the black ink,  
jumping cursor  
that bounces around and spikes  
my vital line  
is my last thread of proof that I did  
what I must do  
but you didn't know, and  
must it be so  
that my apologies are left unknown?

I forgot  
I didn't know  
but you make my best a failed attempt  
and so  
the late nights,  
early mornings  
my yawning at sun's dawning  
must be stifled to a glint in my eyes,  
your layers thin,  
click of a button  
gifts boundless horizons  
but your time that steals mine

is an expansion  
I dare not try  
to lock away,  
shut the beady black eyes  
of digital screens  
haunting shadows you have seen  
the glee of a job well done  
torture through which day after day  
line after line of jumping cursor  
droop and disappear  
as I stare at the reflection  
of me appear as you

*This poem describes my relationship with work, school, my passions and my dedication to these topics which are often met with unrealistic expectations and perceptions that I didn't try my best. I wrote this poem to show that it's difficult to accept failure, be misunderstood, and continue to try again and again through setbacks but to do so, one is met with rewards that seem worth it for a short while. Then the cycle repeats.*

# An Ode to My Charger

## *Daniel Anticich*

An ode to my charger  
The giver of life  
You reanimate the dead  
Like a spooky Friday night

You give happiness  
Like I've never experienced before  
Nothing ever dies  
When your grace gives a shine

No matter what happens  
You always rise from the ashes  
Relighting the lost candles  
Saving us all from madness

You are my hero  
A saviour of man  
Without you around  
Nothing goes to plan

*When I had my older phone that I replaced with a newer one a few months ago, before I wrote this poem, the battery was so bad that it would really only last a single hour before it was close to dead. I had to regularly use the charger to be able to use my phone.*

***Daniel Anticich***

# the Twisted whisper

## Zia Vickers

*Round and Round* the thoughts spiral

*what do I write?*

*what do I say?*

*I can't say anything.*

only silence belongs in this space.

shattered by the harsh scratch of a pencil on paper

the paper formed from a tree and words formed from me

they spiral *Round and Round* in curly letters forming curly words

creating soft sound almost against my will

the noise startlingly loud in this voiceless void

*Around and Around.*

once again I'm here in a place full of stillness and a place full of sound, a place full of people and a place where I am bound

*Round and Round* the world spirals as they whisper in the corner

such small voices shatter the quiet tranquility of this verse

speaking of laughter and happiness and all of the before

where there was quiet peace and silent laughter washing over the room

oh the clock would turn *Round and Round* if only it could reach that time before with no silence and no noise and no warped words

whispering

*why can't you stop?*

*what happened to before?*

*where in the beginning you were begging for more?*

for more spirals of words and more echoing noise

and yet now you have it you beg for before

*Round and Round* the thoughts spiral more

writing themselves onto the paper begging to be let free

with quick strokes and illegible letters their wish is granted forever

engraved into this piece of paper with *Round* curly letters forming

*Round* curly words startlingly loud

And still the words spiral *Round and Round.*

*This poem was originally written as a free write to the prompt "make as little sense as possible". I just continuously wrote down my thoughts and the random things going on around me. After revising it and writing the second half of the poem, it gained a greater meaning almost by accident. The poem is about how good things can easily turn bad, and how fast things can get out of hand. How our anxieties can begin to control and influence our decisions. The flip in the middle was when I was re-writing the end and how it was hard to think of an ending reflecting my emotions at the time. The line "round and round" came from how messy my thoughts were at the time, jumping around, not staying on one topic and how hard it was to think in that moment, how I couldn't really focus on anything else.*

**Zia Vickers**

# Paper Burnings

## *Rebecca Lee*

Burning paper for hungry ghosts we pray.

The paper, bursting into flames.

Stories of horror and myths, they convey.

Burning paper for hungry ghosts we pray.

Dead come alive, walking out of temples.

Offerings ascend high above the clouds.

Burning paper for hungry ghosts we pray

The paper, bursting into flames.

*This poem is about burning paper as offerings to hungry ghosts. I wrote this poem because this is part of my religion and beliefs.*

***Rebecca Lee***

## Hari Kiamat (The Day of Judgment) *Maya Binti Shahran*

*When the sky breaks apart  
And when the stars fall, scattering  
And when the seas are erupted  
And when the [contents of] graves are  
scattered,  
A soul will [then] know what it has put  
forth and kept back.*

عندما تنكسر السماء  
وإذا النجوم تساقطت تناشرت  
وإذا البحار فاضت  
وإذا تناشرت القبور  
فسوف تعلم نفس ما قدمت وأخرت

***Surah Al-Infitar - Chapter 82 - Verses 1-5***

On this day we will all be exposed,  
Questioned.  
Tested.  
We return to Allah.  
We listen to his call,  
With our hearts in fear,  
We will meet our fate.  
We enter our eternal destination.  
Where we will experience eternal bliss or hellfire.  
For this is the day we all shall be brought to judgment.  
Where not a single secret of ours will remain hidden.

*And return [in repentance] to your  
Lord and submit to him, before the  
punishment comes upon you; then you  
will not be helped.*

وارجعوا إلى ربكم وأسلموه قبل أن يأتيكم  
العذاب. فلن يتم مساعدتك

***Surah Zumar - Chapter 54***

*Our Island, Our Future*

*This poem is about ‘Hari Kiamat’ the day of judgment, where individuals are held accountable for their deeds. This poem emphasizes the importance of ethical behavior in Islam and is a reminder of the consequences awaiting in the hereafter. I have chosen to write and submit this poem into the zine as my religion holds a deeply significant place in my life as Islam is not only a religion but a source of guidance and purpose.*

***Maya Binti Shahran***

# Christmas Island

Christmas island, an  
Island filled with many hopes  
Weather hot and dry  
Red crabs moving on the sand  
Crabs migrating their future

*I chose to write this poem about Christmas Island because it's where I live, and it brings a lot of meaning to me since I've lived here my entire life.*

## Isaac's Future

Tomorrow is yet to come but yesterday has already arrived. Changes on Christmas Island could be major or minor. Population could be dense or light. The changes have yet to come and I am hoping that they will come soon. Christmas Island has dry and wet, rough and calm, windy and still, dark and sunny days. The Shire of Christmas Island will grow and I'm hoping for a longer jetty or another one. Most days I go fishing. Some days you catch heaps and some days there's none to keep.

## Youth Poetry on Christmas Island

"You're not a friend at all, are you?"  
"You're another of those bastards"

'That's right.'

another of those bastards

and

You

turn

"Something like that," admitted the man. "I stopped him with an impulse. Let me see some ID."

...Riley reached obligingly  
and wrote out "Help  
the Poor" in large

The wallet and looked down.  
mble compression, the very  
hing movement toward a

Then neck and collarbone. Then down they watched his mark fall sideways right Sergeant Rockhampton, IV.

against the son, represented an  
utter revulsion. His wife can

asked  
in  
known  
is. Mi

Where are you?

**www.orientaljewelry.com**

This image is a high-magnification, black-and-white micrograph. It shows a complex, granular structure composed of numerous small, irregularly shaped particles. These particles vary in size and density, creating a textured appearance. The overall color palette is grayscale, with varying shades of gray representing different depths and materials within the structure.

just relax.

**That**

that even

70000-10000-2005

sharp, agonizing pain  
kness. Oblivion.  
us without

**ditional complication** that we

S and crowded to the telephone extension.

i said quietly

you?

*squire* *the* *call*

It's all right,

**found out**

1960-1961

one's gone

I stood up and prepared to go. "Where exactly is the shiny Creek bridge over Rogers Pass?"

"His eyes gleamed. "About a hundred miles further north," he said. "Lake Louise. High up in the mountains. But don't you worry. You'll be going across it **in the dark**."

The train stopped again at night, although there were a few other passengers still on board. Outside the windows the scene had changed. The lake and snow-covered peaks had dramatically given way to the rolling hills of Alberta.

We were scheduled to reach Calgary at twelve fifteen. There the horses would be detached, and to leave at one thirty, heading up into the Rockies to Banff and Lake Louise. At Lake Louise the owners would get off by bus to the château, the large hotel sitting on the lake's shore. Several people asked if we were to be in front of or behind the *Canadian*.

"We're in front again," I said.

"I wish we were behind it," Xanthe said. "I'd feel safer."

"Behind the *Canadian* there are eight trains," Mr. Unwin, who was sitting next to her, said, "and ahead of us there are freight trains. We're not all alone on these rails."

"No, I suppose not." She seemed doubtful still.

I poured coffee for Mr. Unwin, then took my coffeepot along to the next table, where the conversation was about Zak's mystery.

"I think the trainer killed Angelica. And Ricky, the groom, too. He wants to marry Donna for her money. Angelica knew something that would make the marriage impossible so he killed her."

"What does the dead girl know?"

"She saw the murderer getting rid of the bloody plastic bag. The man had filled the body bag and buried it in the ground for Donna to sit on. She sat with the body bag while nobody else did."

No longer. I couldn't see him. Daffodil looked angry, but she was determined. She said to me, "Maggie, I'm going home. They rain in Canada. I need to go home."

Small movements saved me from tears. I could have seen the brown hair fall over her face.