



Source: Paul McGeough, 'The unknown Zarqawi legacy', *Sydney Morning Herald online*, 10/06/06.

Tags: [religion](#), [violence](#), [art](#), [water](#)

Writer/s: [Diana Wood Conroy](#)

© 2008 Barbara Campbell and the writer/s

She walked carefully along the edge of the strait at dusk, the surging water between the two islands dangerous with crocodiles and jellyfish. Perching on a rock among mangrove saplings, she got out her tiny watercolour box, balancing it on her thumb, and painted the pale waters of the tide. A wash of olive indicated the hairy trees of the island on the opposite shore, where small waves crumpled. Beneath her feet yellow leaves from the mangroves were brilliant against the dark red gravel of the beach.

Later in the early night she walked up the main road of the settlement sensing the feeling of turbulence, unrest, with people moving erratically between buildings, everyone seething, restless. A woman emerged from the shadows whispering 'Someone brought hot stuff off the plane tonight—cartons of Bacardi rum and whisky too'. Like molten liquid, like fire in tinder dry bush, fights literally broke out everywhere, as the rum was consumed by gulping from the mouth of the bottle, on empty stomachs. In the flickering darkness, a shotgun went off, and a man started yelling as though demented.

Retreating back to her old house she waited in the great tension. The shouting man lurched down the road, stooping to throw gravel on the tin roof, with a sound of inarticulate rage. She thought perhaps he was only fearful of being badly hurt, and wanted help. She slipped between the bushes of the garden to go to the Presbytery next door to consult the Mission. Brother Patrick said, only half-jokingly, 'lock the door, turn out the lights, stay inside with stout stick'.

The sounds of the night were magnified as she sat in silence at the kitchen table, with only one dim light. Apart from the guttural shouts of the drunk men from the small houses along the strait, wails and sobs of women combined with the terrified howls of children, and then the dogs barking wove a pandemonium of noise. One of the older women—was it Matilda or Gerarda? started an endless harangue, almost in a rhythmic chant, occasionally breaking out into high-pitched shouts.

She decided to go to the little hospital, despite the big fight going on outside the store. The builder Ryan Fitzpatrick passed her on the way, driving slowly in his utility. He stopped and said he'd just taken the old man James to the hospital; that it was very serious, that his leg was nearly off, he could die. His nephew had been chopping wood, and drinking, and when James had

approached him he had turned on him in a fit of blind rage and chopped at his legs. The sisters patched him up to help get him onto the barge, which might be able to sail to the city on the mainland in six hours or so; it might be a chance to save him.

She saw that the sisters, usually calmly unperturbed by violence were really deeply upset. Sister Anastasia, a luminous figure in her white habit and stiff veil turned to a group of children huddling against the wall of the veranda in a dark bunch: 'Don't drink! Drink brings sadness and sorrow! You look at this!' The sisters looked as though their life's work was crumbling beneath them. A hundred yards away by the edge of the strait James' nephew Ted was being held down by two men, all wading and splashing in the sea. He was wailing desperately, apologising and abject. He had tried to swim across the fierce currents of the crocodile-haunted strait, away from the accident, to get to the other island, to another time and space.

Accompanied by the builder, the artist walked back unsteadily to her house. A man she knew as a kindly presence in the day passed them, staggering and drunk, shouting at them 'Fuck the white man!' And waving his hands chaotically to the Milky Way streaming in the dark sky, 'I wanna kill you all with spears.'

She sat behind the wooden louvres in her house, listening through the night. Above the clicking of geckos and frogs, she heard continuous screams and shouts from the beach houses, and then, when the cacophony died, the despairing lament of a woman.

It was a relief next morning when Gracie appeared, unhurt, walking slowly down the dust of the road, in a fresh floral skirt. Little Lisa sat astride her shoulder, eyes wide and observant, clasping her grandmother's head. Gracie stopped and lifted her down slowly. 'I'm glad I'm a widow—men always drink. The fights make me so sad.' She turned her face away, and with a shrug of her shoulders, stared at the swift surge of the tide.

The artist looked in the direction of her gaze and felt that her little watercolours, important for pinpointing a fleeting moment, might be entirely inadequate to the task before them.

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Diana Wood-Conroy.*