



Source: Kirk Semple, 'The taking, and keeping, of Purple Heart Boulevard: now an Iraqi military mission', *New York Times online*, 14/08/05.

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Fragments from the Sacred Heart Mission

In the little plane, not much more than a Volkswagen beetle with wings, I sat next to the pilot as we flew over Darwin towards the sea. So my first view of Bathurst Island was a bird's eye view. I looked down through misty clouds, seeing solid dense green land with glinting lighter green patches on either side of the meandering strait. Hardly a road anywhere; the land puckered along the water with jungly swamps, spotted with cycads.

At dusk I made a watercolour of the strait, the pale waters of the surging tide with gleams of cerulean, pink, a wash of olive in the hairy trees on the other side, on Melville Island. Along the edge of the strait a line of foam gathered where the small waves crumpled, awash with leaves dropped from the mango trees, brilliant yellow against the dark red gravel of the beach. In the fringe of foam was a frieze of twelve plovers, sitting almost motionless. I went to investigate something bobbing up and down at the water's edge. In the serene light it was a shock to see the chopped off head of a pig, and I noticed the great pile of its entrails, and part of a backbone, among the tangled roots nearby.

A man shouts in Tiwi and English 'You come here!' A family crouches on the shore, cooking pig in the smoke of a fire that also keeps away sandflies. Perched on its high poles the Mission Church faces the strait, standing open and empty, and in the little vestry to the side of the altar an untidy pile of books, an ancient filing cabinet for the vestments, with the book of daily masses open at today's date, August 10, a day for St Lawrence. Behind the church a stony grotto twined with creeping plants holds a blue statue of the Virgin. No one is around, and time has become suspended, hovering around the patterns of another era. A Scandinavian, Peter de Hayr, had spent his retirement, remote from his known world, cutting cypress to build the wooden church, the presbytery and the convent in the 1930s. The remains of an unkempt orchard—a lemon, an orange tree, limes—still grew

uncertainly.

Greg Orsto came to show me the old graveyard down by the airstrip, on the edge of the mangroves. He found under dry fallen leaves headstones in English, even 'requiescat in pace' for an unknown nun or brother, and all the names of saints, including Januarius, Aloysius, Matthias and Declan, names given to powerful Tiwi by the fathers. Just as the sun was setting Greg went ahead deep into the silent trees, calling out in Tiwi to let the spirits of the old men know we were coming, 'not to worry, old man, it's just us, coming to visit your place.' We found the headstone of the carpenter who'd built the church, buried in the 1950s, but most of the crosses had been burnt in the annual fires. Greg knew where his grandfather was buried. He'd worked with Peter de Hayr all his life—an oval of shells and coral on the dusty ground. Ash and charcoal crusted everything from the recent burning. 'That one is where Mary is, she's still around, she comes and talks to me.'

In the dark night the Milky Way streamed across the sky, mirroring the torrent of the strait. Geckoes clicked, and distant shouts came from the drinking end of the community. Greg said 'The old times were better than now'. Bede Tungutalum came and sat outside the Mission hostel, his head in his hands, melancholy at a death in the family. The two men were so dark they vanished in the night, becoming just the sound of soft voices murmuring, feet shuffling in the earth. Bede's nephew had climbed a light pole in full view of his family and jumped to his death with a cord around his neck. Now all the poles wear spiky collars, and sometimes wreaths of plastic flowers.

At dawn though, the sky was like eggshell and I saw the rainbow coloured bee-eater on the spreading Poinciana tree, imitating a Tiwi design. In the cooler morning a mild breeze springs up, moving white clouds over the turquoise waters of the strait.

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