

The Mermaid of Cockatoo

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*The Aboriginal people of the Sydney region called Cockatoo Island Wareamah. The island's first vessels were made of sturdy bark, some probably carved from the island's bushland. The hilltop forest of red gums provided food and shelter to the white cockatoos still common to the Sydney Harbour basin, and the ledge of sandstone around the island's shore was rich with shellfish.**

1873, Port Jackson

My bed is thirteenth from the doorway, one bed less than I am old. The ceiling is high above me, and the room, though it is large, smells of girls. The tall windows are shut and the long doors are locked. Our room is filled with girls, unwholesome and wholesome girls, and our smell is sweet and sour and strong with our cries and snores and moaning. Our bodies lie still in sleep, or thrash, or we creep from bed to bed looking for our mothers, for our sisters, for a friend who needs our care. Young girls weep the loudest for there are no mothers here but the Maam.

This island that we live upon is steep and cleared of trees and though we can see the ships and boats that frequent the harbour freely, and that

travel along the river, and the forested mainlands that surround us, we are not free to leave. Sailors and their women wave hats from a party vessel. I see their bright ribbons. Over the water at Balmain a dun horse gallops with his rider along a stony path.

We are orphan and wayward girls in need of reform and care, and our needlework lacks grace and accuracy much of the time. So says the island's Maam. Our hands are pierced with needles and chaffed with duties. Our feet do not bear looking at. At night some feet flap from the edges of girls' beds. A foot might draw back into the blanket sharply, seeing its mistake; that it cannot fly and has no wings. As the Maam says, we are no angels.

Far below our living quarters, lying upon the water, there is a sailing boat at anchor, and on it live the young boys in need of reform who work the gardens that feed us, and between us the free men quarry the island. The chained mutts bark. Bright and tall in their red cloth, the sentries guard us and keep stray boats away.

The eleven daughters of the Maam sway always at a distance, like angels, in their beautiful dresses. Their needlework is fine, and their voices when they sing the hymns sweet to hear. And the men below stop their work to listen, and the eleven daughters then are like sirens singing to sailors, and the boys and girls are all captives of their voices for none of us can swim nor escape nor hope. I would be a mermaid and swim away, if I could.

This island of correction lies at the mouths of the rivers that join Port Jackson. One of these rivers flows all the way to the old Governor's fine residence. Across the way near that residence, within its sights, is the

Female Orphan School, and it is told that this building is three stories tall. We girls all wish that we lived there, and not here, island-bound.

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‘Thank you, Maam!’ say I, bowing my head with humility when she compliments me on my needlework. Her hair is steely grey and looks strong enough to tie leather with. I am sewing a linen table runner edged with curling bright blue waves for Biloela House. The workroom is quiet during this momentary appreciation of my labour. We girls are not used to flattery. She offers me a new thread, and I see that it is pearly white in colour. She thinks only of her eleven daughters’ trousseaus; it is a good deal of work to find husbands for the daughters in this small colony. I do not talk to her of mermaids.

‘With this thread I will fleck these waves with white foam, Maam,’ I say.

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In this land a brook is called a *creek*. Creeks burble and flow, not cry out with a *creek*, as did a wicked floorboard that alerted my other Maam to the thieving girl in her house. Oh that I would be a bird and could fly away. *Biloela* is the name of this island, now — cockatoo. I would be a cockatoo and fly away. The seagulls caw and fight, they swoop away whenever they would like. They flash white across the sandstone cuts, white across the deep Harbour. They sit in rows on the masting of the boys’ ship Vernon. The birds’ mouths open in the shape of a v when they alight on the Vernon. Four deep silos are cut into the island here, and the Maam threatens us with them as punishment. She would have us climb down into the silos, maybe to drown in the grain I fear. No girl has yet been made to go down, but still there is fear amongst us. Seagulls eat the spilt wheat grain around the silos’ trapdoors. There is a gull that is missing a leg, but still he can fly away. I would be any free animal but this one that I am, God forgive me.

The words for water are very fine. Sluice. Douse. Flush. Drown, dive, swallow, choke. Brook no disobedience!, the Superintendent of this island says. My dear father, Edward Sorrow, and other prisoner men lived in this high ceilinged room before us. The goal master whipped them. Their manacles clanked metal against blood. His lashes and their cries echoed over the stone and the flat water, and it is as if the men and my father are still bleeding and weeping close-by, and that we girls will tend their wounds. Or am I again mistaking the cries of sleeping girls for the ghosts of men? My father is at the Darlinghurst Goal now, and we hear that at the Goal it is too crowded. My poor mother, Anne Elizabeth Sorrow, is long buried at Balmain.

There are traces of convict men's blood still on the stones here, in the cracks. The ship building men are far below us working the Fitzroy Dock. There is always a sailing boat in need of repair for the harbour is filled with free-sailing vessels.

The men gouge out the stone cliffs and out of the rubble are making the island's brim wide and flat. It is taking the shape of a hat. The blocks are taken across the water for the building of the semicircular quay. It is as if our place here at the top of the island is becoming more precarious as it is hewn narrower. I can only pray that this rock and grass expanse upon which we are made to live sinks into the sea. The orphan boys learn simple chores, for they are only very young and quite small. The men are building a new dry dock, and a beautiful ship of wood. Breezes come and bring the smell of cut wood up to me, and this is lovely. The new crane pumps white froths of steam and hoists long girders. The machinery that we girls never see can be heard from inside the buildings below. The grain handling men come and take the grain away on barges. We girls sew.

I watch the water and the tides, and have seen the sharks pass, their fins low above the water. If there is a shark we all run to the wall to look down, for they are what keeps us here. No girl has swum to the shore yet. Schools of dolphins come and are marvellously free, and a whale with her black babe. Surely, their babes are the mermaids' most dearly loved playmates. The mother rolls in the water and spews narrow fountains of seawater. The island falls quiet, with only the dogs barking, and we hear her snort.

There are not too many sharks in this harbour, and so I believe that the mermaids do survive. At sunset I believe I shall see one. Her scales will glint a pearly blue when the sun is low on the horizon and the clouds stretch out with glorious colour. I will know her by her winking scales, shall see that her hair is not weed, nor her bare arms long-tailed jellyfish. Very quietly, in my mind, I am learning to sing like the eleven daughters so that when the time comes I can sing to the mermaids and draw them closer.

A girl has found a stub of finger bone and aged gristle in the rough grass by the wall, and last night we girls did not sleep well. The girl said, 'Shall we find his skull next?' and giggled wildly. She is one of the reform girls who consorts with the sailors and quarry men, and likes to frighten us younger girls with talk that is wild and lascivious.

There are men, that same girl told me, who before us frothed white at the mouth, mad with confinement in the underground cells by the courtyard. Captain Thunderbolt became a bushranger, and he was often kept in these holds, for he would not discipline himself to be quiet. They are evil places, the holes filled and shut closed now. Rich men rowed out

from the town to wager on prisoner's bare-fist fights. Perhaps a finger was bit off then. My father, who is now placed at Darlinghurst Goal, has all his ten fingers, thank God. Those of us who know of Thunderbolt the bushranger much admire his daring. He is the only man to have escaped from here. He swam from this island and was met by his native wife with horses. Captain Thunderbolt's first child was named Marina, and it is by this name that my dearest friends here now know to call me.

'Marina...Marina...' they call, and I let my name loop on the wind before singing back to them that I am coming.

It is my belief that Thunderbolt watched the sharks and sang cheerfully to the mermaids. For how else could he have swum so well to the far shore of Birkenhead, when his friend drowned? The beach that we spy there is gently sloped and friendly, but not close. Thunderbolt is dead three years now, shot by the police, but for a while he was free.

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The Maam brings me a tablecloth made of linen as was the runner, that one of the eleven daughters has edged out.

'A circle of waves,' she asks for, giving me the ring of wood to frame it with and a colourful swatch of blue threads.

'Maam,' I say, 'would you like mermaids in those waves?'

Her look is startled, but happy. 'I have not seen your mermaids, girl!'

'Neither have I Maam, but I know I can sew them. However, I shall need more colours. I shall need that pearly white back again.'

The needlework occupies me well for some weeks. I must sluice my hands often, for it is hot high upon the island this summer, and I do not want my sweat to mark the linen. The mermaids' hair is curled, and their waves of hair curl just like the wave each of them rides. When I finish off one of my creatures, I fold the linen away into the calico bag.

A party is to be held, for which the cloth must be ready and I see no problems ahead, for my needles are fine and sharp. The mermaids are glad to be sewn together.

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A little boy has jumped from the Vernon and drowned. An older boy, and only seven. Why did he do this? Did he not like learning the trades of tailoring and sail making? We girls were quiet tonight and knelt long at our bedside prayers muttering to our lost mothers and fathers and praying God, please take the little boy to somewhere better! I do not think this place is healthy for the minds of young children, whose thoughts can tend to horror. A ship-builder dove into the water to get him, but Peter had already sank. Before entering water one must think of how to swim. Before eating one must thank God for the bounty. Before speaking one must think what it is you wish to say. Before escaping one must form a plan, and mine is to wait until the night of the Maam and Superintendent's dinner party.

My table cloth and napkins are finished.

'I am done,' I say to the Maam, pleased with my work.

She takes what I offer, opening the cloth out to see it. We girls wait for her to speak, but she leaves taking my cloth with her, and not a word spoken. She is thinking of her party, and the marrying of daughters.

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The eleven daughters are singing a great deal, preparing for the party. The eldest, Edwina, rounds us up to learn her songs. We love to sing, and phrase by phrase Edwina sings and teaches them to us. We form a choir, and will sing from the garden to the guests, she tells us. She talks of what is sung at Home in England, and I can tell she would like to go.

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Whales come — ‘A pod of nine!’ cries a daughter. It is the evening of the party. The Superintendent and the Maam hurry from the veranda with the visitors from Home, down to the east shore, the Maam calling, ‘Come, come!’ in a shrill voice, and we wayward girls see that we too are to follow. Jumping and running through the long grassed lawn where we were to sing, we follow the Maam and Superintendent. The eleven daughters trip gaily down the hill with the uniformed young men. I stop at the edge of the garden.

The dining room is brightly lit and the table elegant with the glasses and gold rimmed plates and the silverware, the spoons shining from their bowls to their rims. They are gone to the east shore, and the house is quiet. I slowly circle the Maam’s table. I have not touched the cloth for two weeks now. The mermaids swim gaily around the circling waves and their tails glimmer and wink. I sewed them well, my needlework like an angel’s, said the Maam.

I cannot think clearly, but must run and scramble and leap as quick as I can be, down through the shrubs and weeds to the other shore. I stumble, and pick myself up. I plunge into the dark and deep water with Birkenhead in my sights.

I had meant to fold my skirt and petticoat into my calico bag and tie it to my waist before this swim. I had planned to sing gently to the mermaids first, to call their glinting, playful tails and draw them to me with my singing. And then, swim as do the dolphins, Marina Elizabeth Sorrow behind the mermaid in the creature’s gentle slipstream.

The word for this water is cold. My leg tears against shells. My hands grab at the water. I open my mouth to call to the mermaids, but it fills

with water. The water catches in my throat like as when I watch other girls' tears and feel their sorrows. I am sunk. I know the girls will pray for me as they did for Peter.

I am sunk. We Sorrows are surely not a family fit for this new world.

* *The Story of Cockatoo Island*, Sydney Harbour Federation Trust, 2004