

*An Island*

*—In Chiloé, a Chilean archipelago deep in the southern hemisphere, the continent is said to end and break off into pieces.*

*July 5<sup>rd</sup>*

I haven't sent you any letters yet because I don't really know what to say. It's as if this island had removed something from within me. As if it had transformed overnight into a scorpion and crawled into my mouth as I was sleeping. As if it had scurried throughout my entire body until finding that sphere in my insides where there are words and memory and, from there, sucked out everything I have within me. Then that scorpion scurried back through my body, leaving it tired and clumsy, crawled out through my mouth, and went back to being an island when I woke up.

*July 5<sup>th</sup>*

Today I took a bus that drove onto a boat that left me on an island across from this one. I got off at the port and asked where the main plaza was, followed the directions—which were nothing more than to walk down the only street in town—and before reaching the plaza, I came to a bay and went down to the beach so I could write to you from there. I wanted to organize my thoughts a bit, the things that happened between us. The tide was low, and there were boats in the distance. I looked out at the vastness of the sea and felt vertigo. Later that night, back at the inn, while trying to get back to this letter, I thought about this island and these specks of land that surround it. I thought: I'm lying on this bed in this house on this land, and this land is lost in a vast sea. I imagined this piece of land tethered just barely by a long, thin root, like a flimsy stick connecting it to the bottom of the sea. A stick that's about to snap. This island is going to break away forever, and we, all of us who live here, carry within us that same fragility.

July 11<sup>th</sup>

The inn where I'm staying has a small library, some novels in English forgotten by tourists and a number of other old books about the region. Among those books is the story of Darwin's expedition to this island in 1834. It tells of despicable weather, a dense rainforest where there's hardly any space to exist. He defines this city, the one I'm writing to you from, as melancholy and deserted, a place where time doesn't seem to matter, where the hours are marked with church bells rung by an old man who counts them as he pleases. I think the island has changed a lot since 1834. It's become practically another island since that story; it no longer rains as often, and the sun has managed to seep through that impenetrable foliage. The city isn't deserted anymore either. Despite its distance from the continent, modernity insists—sometimes successfully—on making the streets and businesses match those of any other city in the world. Even so, there's something I recognize in Darwin's description, the idea of this island as a beautiful, untamable, ominous beast. The scattered remains of a continent where all the world's forgotten take refuge.

July 13<sup>th</sup>

I still haven't sent you these letters. I've written them; sometimes, I get all the way to the post office, but I never send them. At this point, you must be believing everything people tell you about me. In these letters I'm writing to you, I attempt to explain myself to myself. Sometimes, I think it's going well; then I reread them, and realize they don't say anything at all.

I made a friend the first week. An older woman whom I met on a street near the church. She asked how the island was treating me, and I said well. Here they call women like her witches; they say this island is full of witches. We talked about my reasons for this trip. I told her a bit about us, about my need for some distance. Then I told her the truth. She listened, attentive, and promised to help me. She warned me of a challenging landscape, of the myths about what

these lands do to people. You'll probably say I'm impressionable, but I know exactly what she's talking about.

There's another person at the inn, a man staying in the room next to mine. I share the bathroom with him; we've exchanged more than a few words. He must be around 40. He's a photographer and an architect, and he's come to make a book about the buildings and structures in the region. I dreamed about him the other night. We were sailing on a boat, southbound, surrounded by enormous waves, and in our tiny vessel we were carrying a pig on its back with its feet tied up. The islands were floating around as the ice floats at the end of the world. They wouldn't stop moving; we had no chance of disembarking.

*July 18th*

The architect photographer saw that I was writing to you today as we ate breakfast. He asked me if I was a writer and I told him no, that I was just a letter writer. The man must be over six feet tall. His skin's dark, and the color of his eyes is simultaneously dark and light. He has a beard and he's strong. I like talking to him; we talk every time he returns from his expeditions. He always invites me on his trips. I'd like to go with him sometime, but then I feel something here stirring inside me. Sometimes he tells me about his trips and his reasons for disembarking in this lost corner of the world. Even though what I contribute to our conversations is always very vague, he doesn't seem to mind. I like that, not talking, just listening to him. Today, for example, he told me the story of a writer who owns one of the islands in the archipelago. The writer built an enormous house on the island specifically for writing, and on the third floor, he installed a big library with a desk in the center of the room and a view of the bay. Once the house was finished, he settled in to live on his island and finish the novel he was writing, but he couldn't manage to write even half a page. Every time a boat appeared in the sweeping view of his great window, he would obsess over it. He couldn't stop watching it until it moved all the way to the other side of the window and disappeared.

*July 20<sup>th</sup>*

A few years ago, the government insisted on building a bridge to the island to improve the flow of commerce with the continent. Some authorities supported the initiative, driven by industrial growth, and further encouraged by the fisheries and some hotel chains. As expected, though some people from the region supported the project, most were wary of building the bridge. An island is an island, so what would it become by building an enormous piece of metal that connected it to the other land? I imagine it's as if an arm were reaching out from the continent, grabbing hold of that rebellious piece of land attempting to break away, as if it were intending to reattach that land by making it fit again, suturing it like a wound. In any case, despite a great amount of foreign investment, they've never managed to follow through with building the bridge. Local mythology attributes these failures to the witches and the hidden forces belonging to the island. I think this land is secretly plotting to pull away slowly, steadily until no arm is long enough to reach it.

*July 28<sup>th</sup>*

I know you're probably wondering why I haven't written to you since I left. But I am writing; I've managed to gather my thoughts and I have a lot to confess to you. However, every time I sit down to write I end up forgetting what it is that I want to tell you. Today, for example, I wanted to write to you about myself, about why I chose this island to end things with you: It's the last place you'd think to look for me. I want to talk to you, but during my stay here I haven't been able to focus. Everything seems to be connected to distance. It's as if the distance between these lands infected its inhabitants with a blurred memory.

*August 2<sup>nd</sup>*

To move from one island to another in the archipelago, we have the ferrymen. They're the men who connect the inhabitants of the farthest islands with the large central island where I'm sitting now, writing to you. Today I went to one of those remote islands. I came to be seen by my friend, the older woman they call a witch. It wasn't hard to find her because on this island, her home island, people know her by that name. I was at the consultation for several hours. After sleeping a bit, we went together to visit the church. That's what women tend to do after a consultation with her, to pay for their sins, I think. We weren't able to get inside. This part of the world is so remote that there aren't any priests; the churches are old and modest, and managed by the residents themselves, who also conduct Mass. The people choose the keeper of the keys, almost always an elder who lives nearby, whose name is placed on a sign at the entrance to the town. I've gone looking for them several times, but it's really difficult to find people here in these lands. I don't know if that's a good omen, but it doesn't matter. Thanks to the architect photographer, I know what the churches are like. They were designed by the residents themselves to resemble the boats they use to get around. Which is to say they're shaped like an upside-down vessel. It's as if those churches, in case of any eventuality, could be thrown into the sea ready to escape, to leave with the tide and withstand the storms, to serve as a place to pray even in the middle of the Pacific. Before talking about what I did today, about how difficult it was for me to follow through with what you expected of me, I want to add that the same logic is applied to all the homes in this part of the world. Their architecture allows for their foundation to be removed. In fact, if someone wanted, they could throw their house into the sea and simply let it go. But I was talking to you about the ferrymen. As I was heading back, I recalled a myth that exists in this region. It's about a ferryman who appears just south of the island. He's dressed in white and responsible for carrying the spirits of the dead to the sea. My ferryman wasn't wearing white, but it occurred to me that he could be that man and that he was helping me to transport those pieces of you that I was carrying and now are dead.

*August 4<sup>th</sup>*

My friend told me to drink some herbal tea and get some rest, so over these last few days I've been resting. I feel as if my blood were cold, circulating that way through my body. In the afternoons I feel feverish. I bought a thermometer, but my temperature is still within normal range. My insides are tired, as is my memory, which fades when I force myself to remember. Outside my window there's a bamboo chime swaying in the wind; the wooden tubes move back and forth. The inn is perched high on the hill, far from the beach. But at night the wind blows with such force through the trees that its sound resembles the waves crashing on the sand. I try to sleep, but every time I'm close, I feel that a part of me breaks off, as if something were fleeing. I want to wake the architect photographer, but I wouldn't know what to say to him. I think again of this place as a piece of land breaking away from the continent and losing itself in the infinity of the ocean. I think again of my body as a collection of small islands about to be lost.

*August 7<sup>th</sup>*

I've been in bed for a few days now with a fever; it's given me time to write to you, but I'm easily distracted. Today I wondered, for example, what life was like here for people in the past. In a sense, being so far away is like living outside of time, where nothing is urgent. Not long ago, for example, women in the archipelago had to give birth in their homes. If I hadn't decided to end it all, if I hadn't made you disappear from me in the way that I did, I would've liked to give birth on one of these islands. Before modernity implemented the law requiring that babies be delivered by professionals, not long ago, every town here had their own midwife—a woman without medical knowledge, but with a lot of experience, whose job it was to help with childbirth. They had strange methods and techniques to facilitate and induce labor, passed down through the island's rich tradition of witches and healers. Things as strange as drinking the urine of the baby's father or sitting in milk. In one of the books at

the inn, I read that when babies were born without breath, the midwives would ask the owners of the home for a chicken from their henhouse. They would place the animal's beak in the baby's mouth and squeeze the chicken to pump oxygen into the child.

*August 20<sup>th</sup>*

The architect photographer sleeps in the room next door. At night I hear him pacing around, opening doors, walking through our shared hallway. Sometimes we talk when we eat together at the end of the day. I listen as he tells me about his trips, his long journeys by boat, his nights sleeping among the trees. Maybe I shouldn't send you this letter, but I do want to write it. Every night he knocks softly on my door to see if I'll let him in. And sometimes I do. I can't help but give in and fall back onto his shadowy skin, like the sky here at dusk. I sink into a dark fold in his arm. I plunge inward until the shadow swallows me. We agreed to leave this Saturday for the island farthest south, to make that trip together. If you were here, I know what you'd think of me.

*September 3<sup>rd</sup>*

I walk on the sand, and my steps break through. Below that first crisp layer is a soft sheet that sinks in. Maybe you're right. Maybe those people who are talking to you about me were always right. I don't know if I'll manage to send you these letters that, deep down, don't say anything. I've returned to this vast, wide-open beach, and it's as if the power of the entire ocean were breaking with those giant waves. Having their intensity right there in front of me makes me want to melt into them. I wonder what it would be like to make my way across the sand, pass through each layer of water, let the waves wash over my body, and walk along the dark depths that must be

the ocean floor. To let the waves from here within, from that sphere inside me that has words and memory, finally meet with those waves crashing before me. To be able to reach the middle of that thin root holding this land in place, to cut it with my scorpion-like pincers, and break away together, this land and me. To float together until we disappear.

*Translated from the Spanish by Michelle Mirabella*