

The Foreign Correspondent

The wind here has turned cold, my pen-pal wrote. She asked me to forgive the state of her writing, as her fingers had gone numb. I sent her a pair of woollen gloves because I knew, in her family, that to ask a favour was taboo, that any request must be framed as a casual comment. This made it hard to figure out exactly what she was saying in her letters, and I was often left feeling clumsy and confused. That was a good sign, my mother said, because it meant I cared enough to want to understand. One afternoon, as I sat across from my mother at the oak table we'd rescued from a skip, she took my pencil and wrote the words *cultural relativism* across the top of my notepad. I asked my pen-pal if she knew what it meant; she sent me a small boat she'd plaited from tussock grass, with two plastic fairies standing at the helm. I recognised the fairies: I'd found them on a beachcombing trip the previous year and sent them up the tube as a gift for her.

We found the tube soon after we moved in. It was in the store cupboard, bolted to the wall behind a fortress of wooden pallets. I'd seen something like it before, in the children's play area of the museum where my mother worked. Years ago, before I grew more interested in sketching the sextants and whalebone scrimshaws, I'd cram brightly coloured balls inside the tubes and watch them snake the length of the piping until the compressed air spat them out again, onto the carpet. A *pneumatic tube*, my mother called it, and told me that department stores had once used them to carry cash and messages throughout the building. We'd moved into an old shop, which explained the presence of the tube reaching into the ceiling of our store cupboard, and the pile of cylinders that scattered across the floor when we dragged away the pallets. But we didn't know why air still hissed through the tube, catching our hands whenever we opened the cap. And, although my mother followed the tube as far as crawl

spaces and obliging neighbours would allow, we couldn't see where it spat the cylinders out again. One day, after school, I sat at the oak table and wrote *Where does this end?* on my notepad. I folded the sheet into a cylinder and sent it up the tube. *With you*, came the reply, several days later. Everything begins in the mountains, my pen-pal said, and since she lived in the mountains, the tube must have its source with her.

My pen-pal and I exchanged long letters through the tube, watching them speed into the unseen spaces between us. We put small keepsakes into the cylinders and sent them on their way – cultural envoys in a foreign land. We mapped the course of the tube, from its wellspring in the mountains down through the fertile terraces that clung to the cliffs below, past woodlands and parkways and cityscapes and sleepy coastal towns, to finally empty – or so we reasoned – into the sea.

I lived in a place where the sea had ebbed away: a former port town, dotted with hulks run aground and mined for metal by local mudlarks who walked the flats, looking for treasure. My mother worked at the maritime museum on the main street; on weekends, we'd go beachcombing with the retired fisherman who lived next door. *Field walking*, I told my pen-pal, copying the term my mother used. Our neighbour had a metal detector: he and my mother would walk the long stretch to the water's edge in slow, careful steps, no sound but the static hum of the detector between them. I sketched their figures closing in on the sea, barely visible from the flats where I'd set myself up on a wind-beaten rock, the silhouettes of boats abandoned by a pier which led nowhere sweeping out before me.

My pen-pal had never seen the ocean. In response to my sketch, she sent a tiny silver box embossed with a *fleur-de-lis* rattling down the tube. Inside the box, she had curled a lock of

hair. In her family, she said, the spirit of a person could endlessly split and reform, yet stayed anchored to the fragments of the body, however far they may travel. The following weekend, I trod the length of the flats with my mother and our neighbour until I reached the disappearing shore. I wasn't sure what I was supposed to do, but I waded knee-deep into the water and threw the silver box as far as I could. I wrote to my pen-pal, telling her the tide had come in, so that when she slept, she would feel the chill of the ocean air and the gentle rock of the waves beneath her.

We had the cold in common, my pen-pal and I. The sea had deserted my town, but the maritime winds still cut to the bone. On the main street, flanking the museum where my mother worked, shops turned a brisk trade in bulky sweaters, knitted from wool harvested from sheep that grazed the hinterland paddocks. My pen-pal lived in a snow-prone hilltop town, where ancient walls traced the boundaries of a city-state that had somehow survived into the present. Her uncle was a prince, she said, who'd refused the coronation. The tiny territory was reshaping itself, and her uncle now hosted a steady stream of tourists at the former palace. He led them on tours of belltowers and lookouts, and showed them where to stop for lunch. The workshops around the market square had given over to souvenir emporiums selling local ceramics and leatherwork. Tourists were caught off guard by the bitterness of the wind, my pen-pal wrote, and leather coats sold well as a result. She sent me a scrap of leather stamped with a gold-rimmed *fleur-de-lis* – an offcut she'd used as a sampler. I had little to repay her with, except my sketches and my woollen gloves, which I'd sent up the tube when she asked for them, in her own way.

My mother didn't ask where my gloves had gone. Our neighbour had taken up knitting when he retired, so my mother simply asked him to knit me a new pair. In our town, we broached

our favours directly, but repaid them quickly. The three of us often sat at the oak table, reading stories about ocean plastic and ghost nets over mugs of hot chocolate. My mother started a recycling programme at the museum, while our neighbour cut sculptures of sailboats and sea life from reclaimed netting. In exchange for my new gloves, my mother told him he was welcome to as many ghost nets as his van could carry.

Our neighbour had a stall at the monthly farmer's market on the common. I went there one Sunday morning and picked out a small, electric blue fish, paying for it with my own pocket money. He told me he'd made it from nylon netting that had drifted across the Atlantic, collecting flotsam until it snared on a patch of rocky coastline to the south, trawling a leatherback turtle to its death. I tucked the fish into a cylinder, along with a list of facts about the Great Pacific Garbage Patch copied from a wall at my mother's museum. I sketched a map of this country afloat between continents that fed it, then disowned it. The Patch was caught in a convergence zone, I wrote, but it was always drifting, so my map could only be a guide. My mother called it a *schematic*, but that sounded too cold – too ordinary – for something that poisoned our fish and seemed to have sucked away the sea itself. Even the word *map*, as I wrote it, felt like a lie that papered over the feeling of digging balloons and bottle caps and crisp packets from the shallows.

Scarcely two hours after I sent the cylinder up the tube, I heard the tell-tale clutter and thump in our store cupboard. Inside the just-arrived cylinder, I found a shard of terracotta tile, wrapped in tissue. On one side was painted a steep, cobbled street that led to a market cross. The white glare of the unseen sun stretched across a cloudless blue sky, throwing shadows on the buildings below. A large, gangly dog stooped its head over a bowl set beneath a dripping tap outside a butcher's window. A cluster of people browsed by the market cross, swapping

coins for postcards and coffee mugs at stalls with striped canopies. At the foot of the scene – I had to move my thumb to see it – a girl stood before an easel, holding a paintbrush. The little canvas on the easel was an exact miniature of the scene on the terracotta tile. The title of the work was printed on the back: *Field Walking at the Market Cross*.

It was my pen-pal, I think – the girl at the easel. In that moment, we understood each other. We were both treading ground towards the edge of the known world, making pictures from whatever puzzle pieces we could find. I showed my mother the tile, although I hardly knew how to explain its significance. She told me about a Spanish artist who'd painted himself into a court scene hundreds of years ago, and now looked out over generations of gallery visitors who studied his face for clues. But the girl on the tile had turned her back on us; she did not seem to invite speculation.

I lost touch with my pen-pal soon after my mother broke her ankle. We'd had the metal detector out on the flats when my mother slipped on the mossy steps that led to where the water once lapped against salt-ravaged piles. Our neighbour – whose fisherman's strength had not yet failed him – carried my mother to the common, to wait for the ambulance. The seagulls waited with us, standing white against the green grass, like a fielding cricket side. They pestered us for food, and I remember thinking how easily they'd moved on from the loss of the sea. We humans clung to the memory of it, sorted and labelled and stored in the maritime museum on the main street.

Our neighbour took me to the museum while my mother was in hospital. I bypassed the artefacts of shipboard culture that usually drew my interest, and went instead to the room where the found objects were kept. Bone dice, hat pins, wig combs and diecast toys pulled

from the flats by mudlarks like my mother were collected here, side by side in glass-topped cabinet drawers. Inside one drawer, I found a row of snuff boxes: strangely delicate things, given the crudeness of the habit. A tiny, silver box caught my eye. I read the label: *Eighteenth century snuff box, found by a local beachcomber*. There was no mention of what, if anything, was inside. I took out my notepad and sketched the box, carefully copying the pattern of the *fleur-de-lis* embossed on the lid. When our neighbour joined me, I imagined I saw a moment's recognition cross his face. But the museum lights were dim, and he'd only caught up to tell me it was time to go.

That evening, as my mother cracked open the good whiskey to repay our neighbour's care, I folded my sketch into a cylinder and slotted it into the tube, watching it clatter upwards until it disappeared into the ceiling. I didn't know how my pen-pal's silver box had found its way to the museum where my mother worked. But I had the feeling, there in the store cupboard, that the fragments of ourselves we'd shared had finished their travels and come to rest. Like the seagulls on the common, it was time to let go.