

No Man Is an Island
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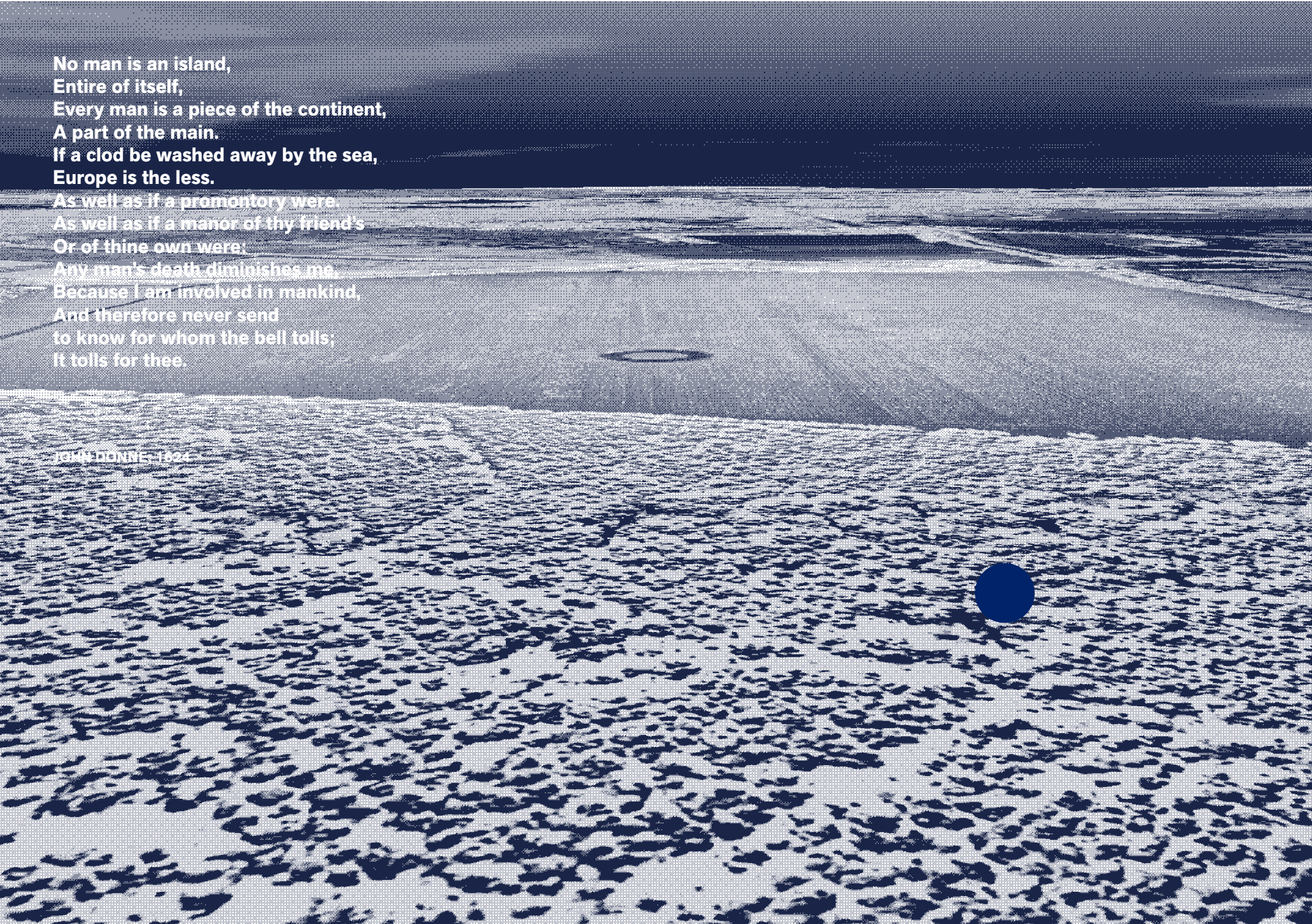
NO MAN IS AN ISLAND

BEN BURTENSCHAW

No man is an island,
Entire of itself,
Every man is a piece of the continent,
A part of the main.
If a clod be washed away by the sea,
Europe is the less.

As well as if a promontory were.
As well as if a manor of thy friend's
Or of thine own were;
Any man's death diminishes me,
Because I am involved in mankind,
And therefore never send
to know for whom the bell tolls;
It tolls for thee.

JOHN DONNE, 1624



The island embodies the notion of the self. In the way that one cannot separate the act of cutting from the knife; we cannot separate the self, and the acts that manifest it, from our identity. The intention in this publication is to make public, or share, the self—the island—using the only one available: my own. This act of making public functions on three levels: the personal, the communal or societal, and the artistic. Sharing one's identity, or the personal characteristics that make it up, is an inherent part of being in a community. Time spent within this state, specifically when it transcends a sensibility, allows individuals to access each other on a more personal level. We learn gradually what it is that makes up our respective viewpoints, a sentiment reflected in poet John Donne's assertion that *"Every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main."* [Donne, John. 1839. "MEDITATION XVII." In Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions, by Henry Alford, 574-5. London: John W. Parker]

This transcendence from sensibility to community is a key intersection within the construction of a community; one that is able to actually comprehend or know the viewpoint (subjectivities) of our "comrades", rather than merely know of them. Of course, the sharing or making public of our self is in no way rare. In a time when updating, posting, and sharing is an integral part of everyday life we perpetually publish our inner subjectivities, for various means but often with the undertone of "being heard". So on a societal level the act of constructing one's impossible island is a retreat that in its own farsity highlights its inherent absence in a larger debate around community in contemporary society. A drive for community that is of course not resolved by a retreat, but would come at this point of permeability when sensibility mixes with community, or the coastlines/ borders begin to open up to the continent.

Permeability—sort of like untraceable intersections, or crossovers so minute one cannot discern them—can be seen in Nikos's return to the sauna, from his retreat to the garden, the sauna (this time a community) cannot be fully escaped; it has seeped too far into him. Nikos's retreat to the garden only heightens his awareness of isolation in his own thought—"I have been thinking"—so he eventually chooses to be free. This choice is a realization of the self's place within a community, or the realization of a lack of a complete identity whilst removed, in order to regain his complete identity—chlorine hair or not—Nikos must be a part of the community. Permeability implies the seeping or leaking of two parts into one, in such a way that they cannot easily be pulled apart; the points of intersection are not completely coherent or explicable.

In Sarah Jones's *By Balance Not by Substance*, there is a continual switching taking place between the position of the isolated and the other. The man's positions are admired and desired by the narrator; it's as this community of two needs each other's attempts at retreat to see their own. But then ultimately the narrator watches his house burn with a new sense of admiration; now, as if he's lost his island, he's forced to open up to the continent. For this publication Jones's text takes the position of the 'Other', embodying the community or the outsider, through the man's attempts at retreat. Where the video included in this booklet creates a farse that pokes at the idea of retreat from within, by subjectivizing the outsider as the person behind the camera, *By Balance Not By Substance* re-articulates this outside position as one that encapsulates a wanting of permeability. In other words, whether retreat is necessary or not, Jones's text highlights that the fact a community doesn't need it.

These coastlines are evident within artistic collaboration; from the conception of this project, a specific

statement has guided my own understanding of the island: What can you bring to the table? Essentially, what of you or of your practice is given to this shared work? This act of sharing, or being appropriated, within a collaboration is a relevant example of the breakdown of borders that leads to a cohesive collaboration as an example of a community. Of course this places a lot of ownership over ideas behind a work and in itself is of detrimental avenue of thought in collaboration. But I raise it to ask: Can one only collaborate, only be a part of a community, or is it integral to this process of sharing to retreat, to find a "safe place" in an effort to return with more? Or does such a process simply remind you of what you are in a time when the rising tide of subjectivity that we experience as users.

Ben Burtenshaw

#1. By Balance Not by Substance Sarah Jones

I tell myself that I don't care, that this careless arrangement suits me perfectly. Then I drive over a particular crest, of a particular hill, where the cloud blankets the valley for eight months of the year, and I feel my expectations begin to blanket my chest in the same light way. There is nothing so good for fantasy as a long, winding drive.

When I arrive, we sit in the corner near the firebox and tell each other stories, our hidden agenda: to pass time. We listen lazily to one another and laugh in a generous but sympathetic way. I stare, a search for genuine attraction, in his dark eyes. Round, wet, sad cows eyes, with lashes that curl over backwards reaching to hold their own heels. At times, I think that I can see something, real desire, hovering just behind my distorted reflection. Everything about him is like this, held together by balance, not by substance. I like the stories that he tells me. It's impossible to know whether they are his stories, or if he simply repeats them as his own.

He tells me there are places in the sea, where the ocean current collects up all of the trash that has been floating on the surface. An endless rolling acreage of waste: a floating tip. Plastic shopping bags and old sandals, lazily surfing silver-tipped waves.

He has built his house, like God: in his own image. The front kitchen section is not even nailed together, balance, not substance. Nothing in the house is straight, not in an "organic" or even an "artistic" way, just because he refuses to use a tape measure. Maybe he doesn't have one, or maybe the rain rusted it shut inside it's fluorescent-yellow casing forever. It makes the house, which is actually just two small rooms, a house of corners. Not right angles but real corners. Open, curving corners, where I might sit on a pile of his dirty clothes. And narrow corners, acute, suffocating angles where he might stash garbage bags full of untrimmed weed, or books, or plastic lunch boxes filled with wet plaster-of-paris to kill the rats.

"What about the wind?"
"Hasn't fallen down yet..."
"Yeah but, don't you think it's a bit dangerous?"

I regret the sensible tone in my voice instantly and I wince at my own prudishness. He laughs lightly and says my name in a tone that is neither condescending nor paternal, but laced lightly with both. I don't know why I said it.

The sun pours through the world's dirtiest windows. He told me once that he keeps them dirty deliberately, for the birds. Sparrows flit through the holes between the tops of the walls and the roof, they get trapped inside, the dirt on the windows stops them from flying into the glass in a disoriented panic. As he makes us coffee, my thoughts fly around the room in a disoriented panic; what am I doing here? Thudding clumsily against the panes.

I shake the thoughts free and wander outside to the sink. It is set into a wooden frame, one side plugged and half full of tannin water, the other decorated with rusty leaf ghosts, dusted like fingerprints on the steel. We talk about old steel in space. Discarded steel just floating around the galaxy. I can see him raise his eyebrows ever so slightly, glancing at the fire, reaching for his tobacco, mumbling, "It's a huge mess" (pause) "rubbish everywhere" (pause) "space junk" (pause) "mostly old satellites."

I'm washing the empty cups, letting him draft up pictures in my head: crumpled bodies of outdated technological wonders, clanking against one another in a black sea, free of gravity. Chipped coffee cups knocking about in dirty washing-up water.

We go on like this all day. Restlessly waiting for the darkness to get thick enough to hide us from one another. When it is so thick that we are sufficiently lost in our own thoughts, I lay all of my accumulated warmth over him, softly, as if asking for permission. He pulls and pushes my skin, with and without want, and when we are spent his body is no longer young, and mine is no longer mine.

He has a plan: if the cops come, looking for the weed, torch the house. There is a jerry can full of petrol behind the front door. I watch his house burning down as I round the last corner. The flames licking at the dirty clothes, the shredded carpet curling over onto itself. The un-nailed beams sliding easily over one another onto the ground, the corrugated tin guillotining the feather filled blankets, the dirty glass shredding the sheets. Dry grass bursting, exhaling scarlett. Piece by piece all of his corners will collapse, the one that he eats in, the one with the rats, the one where the sun comes through and the one we are going to sleep in tonight.

#2. To the Northern Suburbs, from the Mediterranean Sea¹

Isabelle Sully

A fictional conversation in two parts, based on a true story and taking place in a sauna.²

Part 1:	
A Plot to Keep the Dance Alive*	

[Nikos] It's happening again isn't it?
[George] What?
[Nikos] You know what.
[George] (laughs) Yes dear Nikos, I heard the news. But if you go any further, I will begin to think that maybe you are growing too old for your own boots.
[Nikos] How can you say that! I love my family!
[George] Maybe a little too much, eh? After all these years, I still wonder if that could be a thing.
[Nikos] You have lost yourself this time George. Where is you and your pride?
[George] (laughs) I go, to the mountain, to lead the dance!*

[Nikos] Are you playing the fool?
[George] (laughs) Only fools say foolish things.* (pauses momentarily to ponder a thought)
We are old men Nikos, what business do we have meddling in such silliness? Even if, as you say, he is not good, what of it? Politics!*

[Nikos] (exhales angrily) I come here always to relax and I just have you yapping in my ear. I may as well have brought Maria! She just talks so much I hear a buzz now. Y'know the buzz?

[George] To the mountain, the mountain!*

[Nikos] (scoffs)

[George] (continues) I saw her yesterday.

[Nikos] Maria? Where you see her?

[George] (laughs) Why? I see her. She said you come here yesterday. But you weren't here when I came with Eddie?

[Nikos] I came early, I had stuff to do.

[George] (laughs) You go on about tradition and you come here by yourself!

[Nikos] (coughs) Wha-ff did you say?

[George] The buzz? (pauses)
Turn your hearing aid down.

Part 2:	
'Dance Old, Dance Young, Dance One, Dance All'*	

[Nikos] (enters, towel draped around his neck, moans as he bends over to sit down.)
[George] The prodigal son returns!

[Eddie] Where have you been?
[Nikos] I have been thinking.
[Eddie and George] (laugh together)
[George] What did that feel like?
[Nikos] (grunts) Eh! I was in the backyard the other day.
No problem, nah neh. It was sunny and Maria wanted me to finish the latticing.

[George] (interrupts) Oh no...
[Nikos] Neh, just listen for once! (exhales and continues)
I was outside, building this thing. Getting the wood, measuring it, cutting it down, nailing it. Over and over, I cut this bloody wood. All for what? So that our garden can look nice? So that our plants can find their way up towards the sun? A sun that dries them out anyway. Don't they learn that the sun dries them out anyway? And still, if I train them, they grow towards it. So why do I waste my time getting the wood, measure it, cutting it down, nailing it? And then I was thinking, why we come here? Aren't we the same? We grow towards the sun and our skin dries out from the steam! Our body dehydrates from the heat! Our hair smells like chlorine, and our wives think we stupid. So I didn't come for a couple of days. I just sat at home and watched the garden. Some cradled fawns, or wolf-cubs!* But like a stupid old man I just sat at home and watched my garden.

[Eddie] How did you stop?
[Nikos] Easily. No effort. I chose — and I was free*
[George] (laughs) The world's collapsed!*

[Nikos] You laugh, but in ways mine has.
[Eddie] So why you come back here then?
[Nikos] Ours be the common good.*
[George] The common way!*

[Eddie] The way that all can share?*

[Nikos] Maybe?
[George] Maybe.
[Eddie] I see now, I see.

<i>[Eddie]</i> (smiles to himself)	
Because this is what we do.	
1	Following the Second World War, the Australian government introduced a Department of Immigration to encourage European migration to Australia. The major policy of this department was named Populate or Perish, and a large amount of the Greek population caught this wave to Australia. Now, male members of this generation of immigrants can often be found frequenting the sauna of the local swimming pools in the northern suburbs of Melbourne—among other visitors and at other locations (of course).
2	In Greek tragedy, the word myth [<i>mythos</i>] literally means story. But myth was also a kind of truth from which states and individuals derived their ideas of themselves and their genealogies.
*	Again: all sentences and phrases marked with an asterisk are a direct quote from Euripides play <i>The Bacchae</i> (405 BCE), and have—despite the absurdity—ekphrastic relationships to the characters within this story, and to the metaphorical relevance of the sauna to the text "No Man Is an Island". However, these relationships are as relevant as you choose them to be; like the feeling of isolation to an island, and so forth.

