



# Atlas of Drifting

## Circlejourney





MARINE TRAFFIC AND AIRCRAFT  
BETWEEN SINGAPORE AND BRISBANE  
8 MAY 2021

This is for  
everyone who's  
felt lost

in a year of  
which no map  
can be drawn



This is a story about two cities.



SINGAPURA  
सिंहपुरं  
SINGAPORE

(DRAWN TO SCALE)

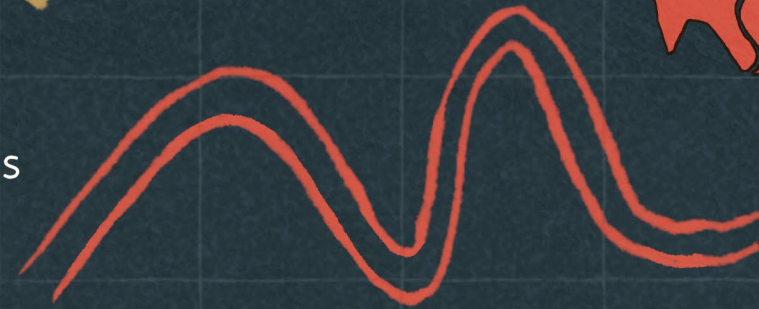


Singapore was named for the lion that Sang Nila Utama saw the day he first set foot on the island, centuries before the British colonialists did. The tale goes that during his voyage there, he threw his crown from the ship to calm a storm.

Since time immemorial, the island has lain at the crossroads between Indian and Pacific oceans, growing as its people grew, jetties to wharves, new land raised from the sea.

My parents were among those who came here in search of something better. No doubt they had their own crowns to throw into the sea: that is the fare of starting life over. We lived by that fabled port, where container stacks block the view of the waters.

MEANJIN  
BRISBANE



Situated in the lands of the Yugara and Turrbal peoples, the downward-pointing bend of the river is known as Meanjin, a Turrbal word for "spike".

It was colonised by the British in 1824, who called it Brisbane, violently claiming it as a purgatory for their convicts.

Like my parents and their parents, I left home seeking hope and escape both. Like many before me, my internal map of this city began with its riverbends.

*We once thought we could fathom the vastness of the sea from the lap of an island shore. Watching ships tilt*



*across the horizon, we laughed knowing nothing*

SIN



I took this flight on Valentine's  
Day of 2020. Now, 500 days later,  
it is still the last international flight  
I took.

It almost felt like fleeing. That descent.  
That plunge into silence.

OOL

*could survive the fall.*



Then, you know how the story goes. The gates slammed shut behind me. If I went home, I would not be allowed to return. I had to choose between keeping my new life and returning to my old.

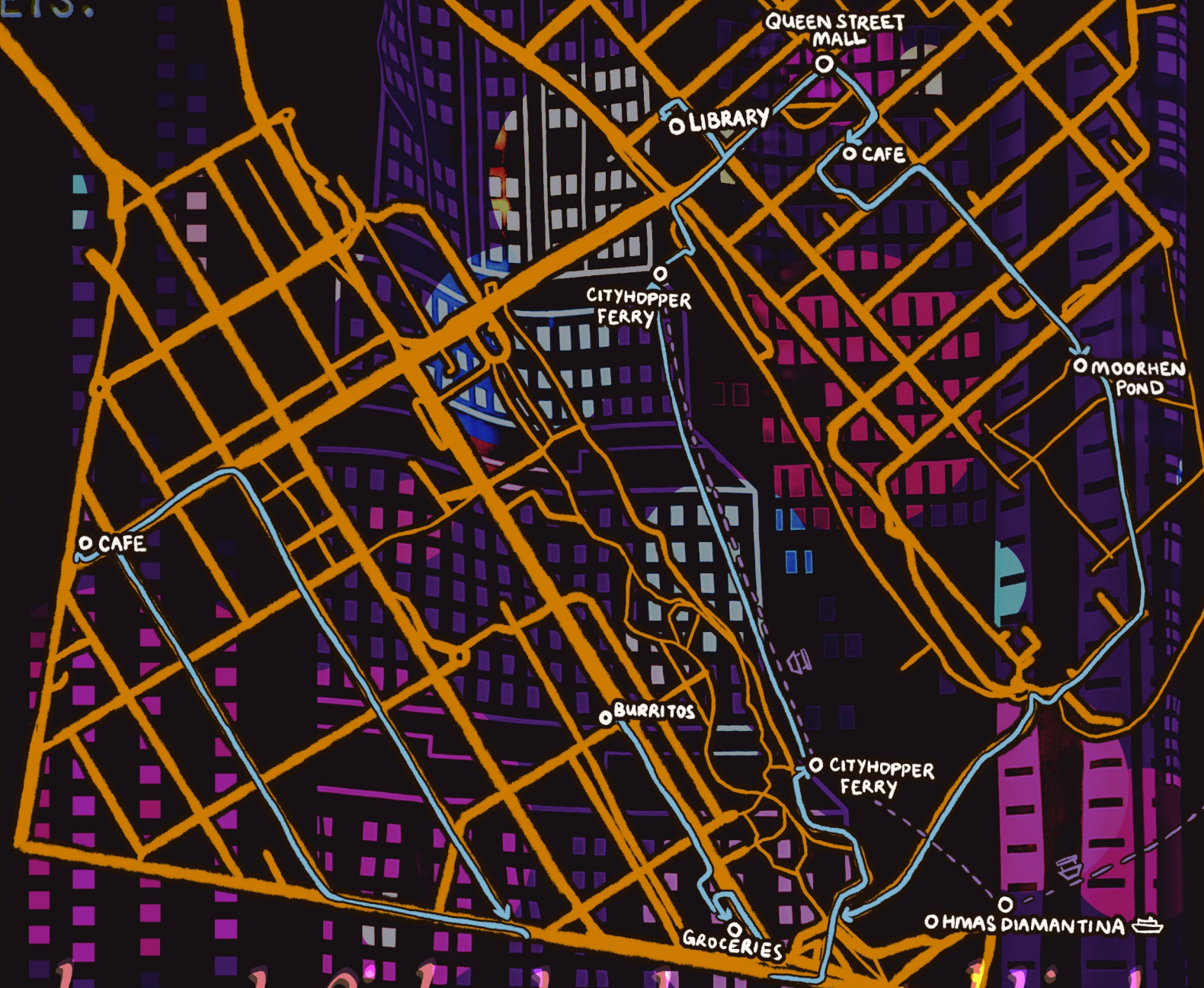
So began  
the year  
I lost contact  
with the sea.

*We did not see how, beyond continental margins, submarine  
canyons channeled secret rivers onto underwater plains, or how*





PSYCHOGEOGRAPHY IS THE STUDY OF HOW URBAN SPACES INTERACT WITH HUMAN EMOTION AND PSYCHOLOGY. IT IS CONCERNED WITH CITIES NOT AS TOTALISED WHOLE BEHELD FROM ABOVE, BUT AS PATCHWORKS OF INFINITELY TINY SPACES THAT WE TRAVERSE AS WE WALK THEIR STREETS.



The Brisbane CBD has the postcode 4000, designating it the centre of Queensland. I barely noticed as my life rapidly aligned itself around this new world axis.

It was small, smaller than home, but walkable, in a way home never was: glowing in colours, a lotus on the river at night.

Like I had eaten its petals, I lost every need and want to leave.

*the abyssal fish slowly went blind, their unseen lights speckling the cavernous dark.*





Trapped inland with only the internet  
and my thoughts for company, I wrote.

Tales of journeys and wandering.  
Tales of navigating the unknown.  
Tales of the sea.



On the surface, I felt well  
enough. But something deep  
within me cried out to be heard,  
again and again.

as if my soul felt the absence  
of ocean waters, a stagnant hollow  
where they used to move



with the weight of her shipwrecks.



While I hid, isolated

on this waterless isle



that I learned

to call a home.



# *Here I chance upon the sparkling clasp of a coral reef*

In my dreams I drifted among  
a thousand missing things.  
The birdsong. The pressing  
humidity. The stars.

By the fluke of its position  
upon the equator, Singapore always  
had a vast vantage of space,  
spanning both hemispheres.

Here, the constellations I know are gone.

It is the surest sign  
that I am far away, so far away  
that the stars have changed.

In exchange for the heat, we saw  
the Great Bear, the Argo,  
Orion and Centaurus,  
Orihime and Hikoboshi,  
dancing across the sky  
as the earth swung through  
its orbit.

But here, among bright strangers,  
lies the Southern Cross.

On the school parade square in  
the year 2012, we watched it skim  
the southern horizon like an omen.  
It is here too, pointing silently in  
the same direction it always has.

# *tracing the chain from one atoll to the next.*





To map a place is to know it.  
To map a place is to own it.  
To map a place is to tame it.  
To map a place is to subjugate it.  
To map a place is to render it  
powerless.

How do I map this distance?  
How do I map this waiting?  
How do I map this?



As summer returned, trips were cancelled. My distance from the sea remained. I found myself lost in the pursuit of reading all that I could find about whales.

*I leapfrog dashed borders, beginning*

I first saw a whale when I was six years old. I have lived by the sea all my life, but it was in that moment, when a humpback whale lifted its tail from the water, that I felt its vastness unfold in me.

EVERY YEAR FROM MAY TO OCTOBER, HUMPBACK WHALES OF THE SOUTHERN HEMISPHERE MAKE ONE OF THE LONGEST MIGRATIONS KNOWN IN THE WILD.

HUGGING COASTLINES, THEY SWIM FROM ANTARCTICA TO THE WARMER WATERS OF THE TROPICS, RETURNING YEAR AFTER YEAR TO THE VERY SAME BAYS AND BEACHES WHERE THEY WERE BORN, TO CALVE AND RAISE THEIR OWN YOUNG.

*to contrive an idea of you  
from the contours of these countless coasts.*

It amazed me that they would travel these vast distances, always finding their ways back to the bays of their birth.

Now I'm starting to understand that inexorable pull of home.

It isn't joy or need that brings one back time and again. It's something you can't put words to: the song it sang to you before you knew south from north, before you knew your name.



Sometimes, it comforts me to know that scientists have mapped the shapes of the continents a hundred million years ago. It was an alien world, one where the Himalayas, the Andes and the Rockies did not exist.

In another million years, we, too, will be nothing but imprints and bones buried in kilometres of silt in a world we do not recognise.

Compared to that, this wait is nothing.

And yet I think

A year of yearning is much longer than an eon of silence

ABOUT 100 MILLION YEARS AGO, CENTRAL AUSTRALIA WAS SUBMERGED BY AN INLAND SEA. FOSSILS OF OCEANIC REPTILES HAVE BEEN FOUND HERE.

145 MILLION YEARS AGO

TODAY

© I WAS HERE

© YOU WERE HERE

*The geological record says we are five centimetres closer every year. In geologic time—perhaps, if you were a reef and I, an archipelago—we'd meet at a faultline in the next eon and crumble together, leaving a new continent where we were before.*



Today, we stand knee deep in the shoals,  
losing ships

to the horizon between us. Salt sifts  
between our toes.

Truth is, everything about  
this strange new world  
profoundly terrifies me.

But who wouldn't be  
terrified?

and I feel my body settling, sinking  
deeper into this new city's loam  
and I'm still afraid to let it become

home.

Home.

I left home because home left me  
no room to breathe or to be.

But when you leave, you leave  
all of it. Good and bad. Fruit  
and rot.

← THIS WAY HOME(?)

THIS WAY TO THE SEA →

- SAW A FRIEND'S CONCERT
- BIRTHDAY PARTY
- DIVULGED MY DEEPEST SECRETS
- CROSSED
- LUNCH WHEN MY DAD VISITED
- PARTICIPATED IN A PROTEST
- DEBATED A STRANGER
- BOARDED MY FIRST FERRY
- HAD A PICNIC
- GOT CAUGHT IN THE RAIN
- SAW PLESIOSAUR BONES
- GOT DRUNK
- WROTE A STORY
- MADE A REGRETTABLE PURCHASE
- HAD A BREAKDOWN
- PICKED UP A BLANKET
- LIVED HERE
- GOT OFF A STOP EARLY
- ATTENDED MY HOST FAMILY'S CHURCH DINNER
- SPRUNG A BIRTHDAY SURPRISE
- BOUGHT ELECTRONIC PARTS
- D&D
- CRASHED OVERNIGHT ON NEW YEAR'S
- HAD A HAIRCUT
- MADE FRIENDS OVER CARD GAMES
- PLAYED JENGA
- HAD MY FIRST GP APPOINTMENT
- EXPLORED TREES
- WATCHED DOGS PLAY
- LIVED HERE 2 WEEKS
- DRANK & TALKED TILL 4AM
- GOT LOST
- GOT WASTED
- FELL IN LOVE
- PERFORMED LIVE



And I won't be here to see the continents drift.  
The mountains form. The rivers shift around them.

So I must choose someday,  
between one land and another.  
And I don't know how I could give one up.

● HOME

But  
I know  
and it  
comforts  
me,

that  
time and tide,  
sun and stars,

southern  
cross,

magnet  
north,

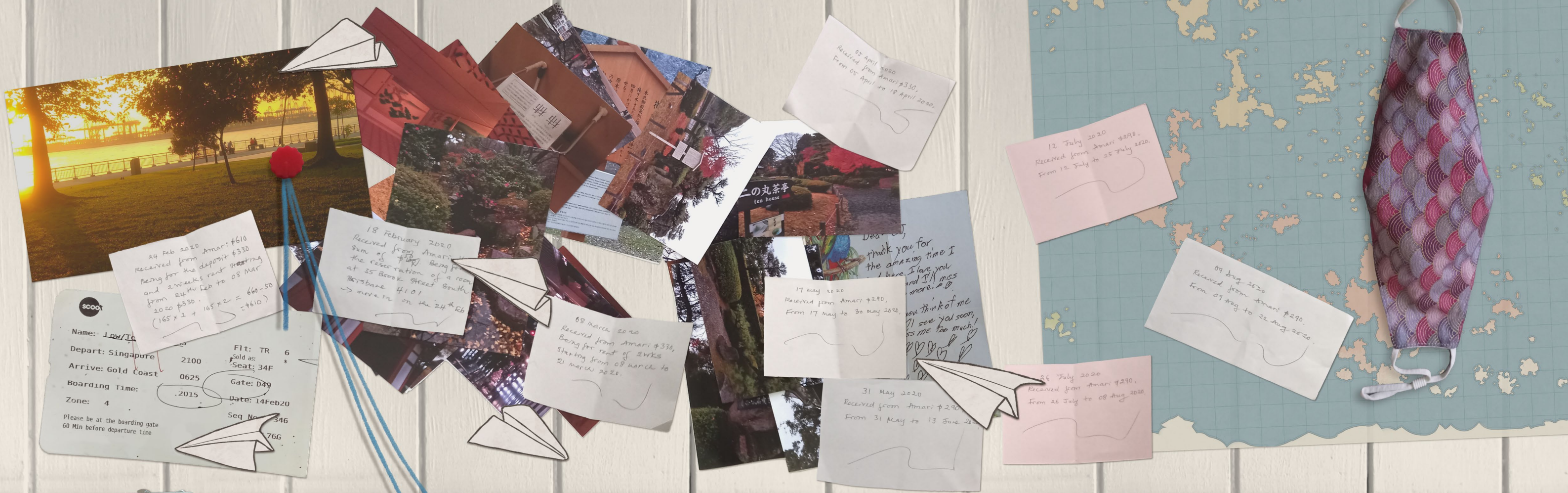
labyrinth,  
neon sky,

ancient stone,  
sheltered bay,

will guide my way  
like gravity  
draws a river  
to the sea.

● HOME





When you laugh, it almost feels  
like these ten million years have already passed.

