

Summers Gone

There is a place that we used to go. It was a time captured in the photographs I took that summer when we still used 35mm and everything was still slow. There's one of the fellas prising an abalone off the rocks with screwdrivers, a few of the empty rock shelf, a wave peeling across the centre of the print, and another looking back from the cunjevoi reef across the bleached sand of Summercloud Bay.

We'd suit up: the wetsuit stiff over our limbs, pulling the zipper cord up the length of our spines, we'd fill our black armour with nervous flesh. Black Rock is heavy and fast, though not too difficult to traverse, moving in a sort of circuit if you read it well. (Jump off the reef on the left of the point, catch a wave, spit out and paddle back up the channel on your right. Or if the swell is pumping, run across the reef and jump back off the left-hand rock shelf where you started.) How to put words to the experience of surfing – having no control of the world above which we float, fearing and wanting to be swallowed by the surge? I don't surf as much any more. I'm not as fearless as in my youth. It's funny how we think we'll stay as we are forever and ever.

As kids the ocean raised us, saved us, scared us. We could have grown up somewhere else, played cricket and rode horses instead. We can't imagine it though – not having had the tide lap at our boards, our leashed ankles or biceps. Not having had a fishing rod or a hand line as kids, being without the pull of the current against freestyle arms, and the laughter. Whole days spent in the salt.

My street fronted the southern end of Woonona Beach: no houses backed on to the dunes then, just vacant lots and a slip of cycleway. My brothers and I would rule the shoreline, fishing, running our dog up to the point and back, tumbling down dunes and crashing through waves and splashing across estuaries, hiding from the disorder of our housing commission street.

My first boyfriend, Reon, and I would surf most afternoons. We'd do surfing as a sport at school, plus surf in the mornings and three times or more on the weekends, stopping for hot chips and sandwiches at his house. We'd take road trips down the south coast, chasing the swell, to Red Sands, Cowries, Mystics, Steamers and Black Rock.

Black Rock is the reef that hangs off the point of Wreck Bay Aboriginal Community in Booderee National Park, on the south coast of NSW. In 1995 the Wreck Bay Aboriginal Community won title over 90 per cent of Jervis Bay Territory, about 6677 hectares, and since then has leased much of it out for visitors to enjoy. The community is on Yuin Land, and made up mainly of Wandandian and Wadi Wadi people. Saltwater people.

I remember the first time I surfed at Black Rock. It was summer, the summer we kissed. And one of our first road trips – the young lovers' highway, open car windows and the sun on our forearms. These were your places – your favourite surf break, the place your dad took you for the first time when you were 12. The best bakery on the drive back, warm apple pies and custard tarts; the music – Grinspoon was always playing then, I think. Those early mornings when we set off, tiptoeing into the kitchen for toast and sharing a standing cup of tea while the car warmed, your first car. The punk rock would be blaring through the speakers, the early morning mist rising beneath the streetlights that would flick off just as we hit Princes Highway.

I'd been to Booderee National Park before, fishing when we were kids or for a quick dip on the way home from a bushwalk at Pigeon House Mountain. I'd also been to an indigenous students' camp, for 13- and 14-year-olds from up and down the coast. For a week we'd learnt about ourselves, walked Yuin land, heard the stories of the place and eaten bush tucker. We were driven down there by bus, all us kids, the east coast Kooris, scattered in our white communities and schools. We were taken to Booderee – I think we camped at the field station. We told stories by firelight, about ourselves, how most of us kids felt like we didn't belong. I remember the camp being really important in forming my identity, how I realised so many other kids were confused about the image of who we were that was projected in history class or through the news, how we felt both pride and shame at being Aboriginal and being a minority. Going to Booderee, to see a thriving Aboriginal community in their ancestral place, was exactly what we needed, as kids.

The locals ruled the surf: there was Ray Ardler, Nick Carter, Steve and Jeff Williams, the older generation. Then there were the younger fellas, like Morgan Brown and Kenny Dann. Morgan remembers watching Australia's first indigenous surfing competition at Black Rock, in 1993, as a grommet. Now he runs part of the Black Rock Wreck Bay Boardriders club, that sees surfers, indigenous and non-indigenous, carve the reef break every year.

Morgan remembers surfing all day long with his brother at Black Rock, how he'd collect the conch or turban shell snails, eat a bunch on the reef, run home for a bowl of Weet-Bix and back for a surf, feeling sick. His mum standing on the headland of the housing block and yelling the boys in for dinner, how her voice would echo across the calm of Summercloud Bay. The Browns have lived in the community forever; with 13 uncles and aunties, and every other person being Morgan's cousin (27 of them), it really feels like a big family. There's a lot to be said for being on someone's land with the people that own it still there. In a country gone quiet on genocide, guilty of propelling an image of a dysfunctional culture and people, that intact and beautiful Aboriginal ground that has been given back is both sacred and rare.

Over the back fence of my house where we grew up as kids is where your dad grew up too. Your dad, a Woonona surfer and local, would talk about how lucky he was – potluck it was that his family had been given a government house in Woonona and not in Sydney's western suburbs. Sometimes I think about it too – what would have happened without the beach, without the water.

Morgan attributes to the beach the strength and solidarity of his community. Morgan reckons he still would have been all right, having parents that didn't drink, ever. But it was what was always there, and surfing went with everything: if you played football you surfed as well, soccer you surfed, motorbikes and cars and you still surfed, or swam or fished. You were still part of it. He remembers being at his Auntie Dawn's house and sitting in the lounge room: the telly would be on but all you were looking at was the waves breaking at Black Rock, and thinking how good it was to be home.

We don't road trip together any more; we grew out of young love, maybe into something better. The next summer I moved out of that childhood home and into the house that was meant to be knocked down, with my brother Billy. And Mum, she eventually left the bottle, together with her old boyfriend, and moved to the bedsit. He bought that home of ours on a good deal from the Department of Housing. Remember the summer when you took me back there, in your getaway car? How we laughed when it took me three girlish throws to smash that brick through the window, and how I had to run so fast, for the last time past those sad front yards, and into your car?

Remember the summers I'd arrive back behind a trail of postcards and letters? How it was always you I'd visit first, back to your house for a hot meal or a bed in the caravan or just a big laugh with your dad and a story about anything and everything.

There were other summers. Two summers ago when my belly ballooned and Lila arrived. The summer we were all together; the summer your dad died. How sad it was to see you lose your best friend. That week I remember seeing the big storm move up the coast. The surf was huge down south, you'd said. There was lightning, they said, he went out with mother earth, the great glory of the sky and the ocean.

This summer, Morgan was still there. We walked over the mussel shells, the pipis, the abalone, the lobster, past the lomandra grass and bitou bush around Black Rock, we crouched on the reef and cracked fresh oysters. He's looking forward to the swell picking up, he said. We rock-hopped out to the secret spots of youth. When we were standing out there I realised how we were speaking, Morgan and I, in that old language. How we agreed about the surf being blown out.

I realised how much the ocean is part of us all, neutral ground, the common language of big swells, no swells, flat, blown out, onshore, offshore, nor-east, nor-west, southerly, high tide, low tide. The blow-ins, the locals, the teabags, the drop-ins, the stand-ups and bodyboarders.

How the younger board-riders hold the language, navigate the breaks. As I drive the coast road, the one we used to take, I reckon all the Wreck Bay cousins will still be distracted from the view out Auntie Dawn's window and across to the left-hander at Black Rock. Forever and ever.

– Tara June Winch