Tracks in the Sand
Surf Writing and Place

A thesis presented
by
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Through a discussion of surf writing and place, and an excerpt from a novella *Three Pines*, this thesis explores the creative significance of Australian coastal landscapes.

It analyses the work of Tim Winton, specifically *Breath* (2008) and *Island home* (2015) to explore the difficulty inherent in essentialising the surf experience. This thesis argues for the importance of surf writing, with writers such as Winton addressing larger social, cultural and environmental issues. The thesis finds that surf writing is a genre in which time and place are confused and physical landscapes can be internalised through imagination, memory and experience.

The creative work of this thesis represents the first seven chapters of a novella *Three Pines*, set on a family bed and breakfast property on the New South Wales Coast. Told from the perspective of an adolescent boy learning to surf, the story utilises the conditions and moods of the ocean as epithets for his life experience in the area.

Woven together with the young boy’s experience is the story of his mother. Told in a series of diary entries over time, this narrative focuses on the boy’s parents, examining the fragility of their relationship and the difficulty of etching a life out on the coast.
In extension of this thesis’ argument, that surf writing is most valuable as a writing platform or way of seeing the world, this piece uses a child’s love of surfing to tell a wider story about our connection to place. It challenges the idea that surf writing must focus on the ‘moment’ and instead digs in and around the coast weaving surfing into the texture of a much broader narrative.
Declaration

I Dominic Counahan declare that in completion of the Master of Arts in creative writing this thesis is my own, original work and satisfies the required word limit set by the Research Higher Degrees Committee.

28 November 2017
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Part One
Thesis Introduction

This thesis will examine place and memory, specifically Australian coastal landscapes, through a discussion of surf writing in surf magazines, novels and memoirs. Through analysis of the work of Tim Winton, specifically his 2008 novel Breath and his 2015 memoir Island Home, it will propose that the best examples of surf writing are those that look beyond the surfing moment itself. It will seek to understand the difficulties inherent in writing about the ocean and suggest surf writing’s importance as a thematic platform used by writers to address larger social, cultural and environmental issues. In dealing with these possibilities it will attempt to answer that commonly asked question of why we even bother writing about waves (Warshaw 2010: 220).

Despite perceptions of surf literature as self-congratulatory, literary masturbation (Endo 2013) or claims that writing on the subject is hopeless (Joyce 2011), this study will assert the value of surf writing in understanding human relationships with the natural world. Surfing is itself a confluence of social and natural elements, and beyond translating an experience that is often difficult to comprehend (Knox 2008), surf writing enables writers to unpack the significance of personal connections to landscape. As a place writing ‘type’ in which notions of the absoluteness of physical
space are challenged, surf writing symbolises an internalisation of landscape leading to the creation of narrative worlds that are largely non-physical (Baker 2009).

Any effort to unpack surf writing’s significance must be preempted by a definition of the genre. While writers often classify surf writing by its impossibility (Joyce 2011), citing the powerlessness of language to articulate the sublime (Stranger 2011), others offer more hopeful designations. According to Patrick Moser, surf writing can be characterised by its relationship to surf culture (2008: 4). Described as one medium within a broader representational field of ‘images’, written accounts of surfing have effectively been snapshots of the sport’s changing cultural history. For Moser, the evolution of surfing culture has created with it a mass of written material evidencing these changes, and while these accounts often demonstrate stylistic and attitudinal differences, they provide a glimpse of what surfing was at any given time (2008). Therefore, while on the face of it surf writing could be understood as any written material that contributes to understanding surf culture, this study will confine its investigation to more literary accounts of the sport, with a particular focus on surf writing of the last decade.

This thesis will first study the romantic notion of the sublime, exploring its persistence within surf writing types (Carroll and Wilcox 1994). Underscored by ‘an ineffable experience of the infinite in the contemplation of terror and beauty in nature’ (Stranger 2011: 163), the sublime represents a core aspect of the surfing experience, transcending both artistic and commercial boundaries in surfing representation (Warshaw 2010: 239).
In chapter one, this thesis will unpack surfing’s close relationship to the romantic sublime (Taylor 2007:934) and explore the possibility of an aesthetic approach to surfing based on a dedifferentiation of experience and appreciation whereby surfers have become both practitioners and communicators of the sport (Rojek 1995: 147). This chapter will then examine how these notions of sublimity are reflected in Tim Winton’s own writing practice, and within his narrative fiction, specifically within his 2008 novel *Breath.*

The chapter will conclude that, despite a tendency to position people at odds with their surrounds, surf writing’s consistent employment of the notion of sublimity is significant in that it epitomises the intense natural relationships that a surfing life creates (Krein 2007: 90). It will assert that the often, self-congratulatory tone of sublime surf writing, responsible in part for perpetuating interest in the sport, should also be balanced against the implications of surfing’s connection with the sublime indicating an intimacy with nature that the surfing life creates. Finally, this chapter will suggest that these benefits extend to participants and non-participants of the sport alike, and that the most effective surf writing communicates the benefits of an engaged relationship with the natural world to both groups equally.

After exploring surfing’s relationship to the sublime and identifying how these ideas are expressed in *Breath,* chapter two of this study will focus on the role of stereotype in surf writing. In particular, it will examine the travel narrative and the idea of the perfect wave, identifying these as surfing’s most pervasive stereotypes. After examining how they have reoccurred in surf writing, this chapter will then position these tropes within discussion of spatial theory, particularly the work of Leonard
Lutwack, to argue surf writing has suffered from their overuse, resulting in the homogenisation of surf narratives.

At this point, I will also consider the influence a booming surf industry has had on the genre of surf writing, in which the business imperatives of surfing brands and their heavy sponsorship of surfing magazines have driven the use of stereotypes that narrow the scope of surfing communication (Stranger 2011: 169). This discussion will lead me to question whether a sub-genre of surf writing could exist outside a surf industry at all. Given the publishing opportunity that surf magazines offer to budding surf authors, it will also argue that writing on the sport has aligned with the financial imperatives of surf brands driving the acquisition of new surfers and industrialisation of a once non-material lifestyle (Warshaw 2010: 289).

After considering the negative implications of these stereotypes, this chapter will then consider how themes of perfection and travel inversely allow us to consider the meaning of space in surfing. I will argue that these highlight an erosion of time and space significant to surfing in which land and oceanscapes can be rendered non-physical (Foucault 1984). Here, this study will refer to Michel Foucault’s theorisation of ‘heterotopias’ focusing specifically on his fourth and fifth heterotopic principles which explore this theme of spatio-temporality suggesting that particular spaces occur beyond regular time and are based on systems of opening that connect or isolate us from our surroundings (Foucault 1984). Finally, this chapter will refer to Edward Soja’s notion of ‘third space’ (Soja in Maier 1996) to suggest that surf writing is most significant for its ability to reframe physical space, creating landscapes that exist largely in the mind.
After discussing spatial theory’s relationship to surf stereotypes, chapter three will then explore memory and language in surf writing, noting how a desire and fixation on articulating the surfing act specifically has often precluded surf writers from a wider contemplation of surfing’s full experience (Joyce 2011). Additionally, the fleeting nature of waves and surfers’ difficulties in remembering what they are has resulted in ‘a literature of experimentation and approximation, and ultimately differing degrees of failure’ (Knox 2008). This difficulty points to the memorative challenge of surf writing in which the narratives of single waves compete with the consideration of surfing’s broader experience.

The final chapter of this thesis will explore the creative opportunities in writing about surfing. Through further analysis of Tim Winton’s fiction and non-fiction work this chapter will assert surf writing’s value beyond simply archiving surfing’s cultural evolution (Moser 2008). It will propose that the most effective forms of surf writing are those that evoke a sense of place. Here it will locate surfing within a wider contemplation of the natural world, referring to Winton’s *Island Home* to suggest that as a form, surf writing’s value lies in its evocation of human relationships with nature.

This chapter will describe surf writing as a type of place writing in which efforts to represent the sport reveal a process of the internalisation of space through memory and experience (Gretlund 1994: 2). After unpacking the literary notions of place and landscape within the context of spatial theory and exploring the nuanced differences between these, this chapter will use Breath to argue that surf writing is symbolic of a
personal connection made to landscape in which the boundaries of time and space are blurred (Thacker 2003: 20).

It will reference Bron Taylor’s positioning of surfing as an aquatic nature religion (Taylor 2007) and Kim Satchel’s discussion of a new ecological sensibility (Satchel 2008) to suggest the complex and profound connections to place that a surfing life creates. Additionally, this study will explore the work of Australian surf photographer John Witzig and refer to Karin Amimoto Ingersol’s notion of seascape epistemology to emphasise surfing’s wider significance in formulating and communicating place.

This thesis will conclude that at its best, surf writing enables us to better understand our relationship with the natural world. Through its coalescence of physical and non-physical elements, surf writing reframes our understanding of what space is, representing a type of place writing where meaning extends far beyond the boundaries of specific surfing moments.
Surfing and the Sublime

This chapter will focus on surfing’s relationship with the romantic sublime and explore how these ideas have been reflected in the writing of Tim Winton, specifically in his novel *Breath* and 2015 memoir *Island Home*.

It will first discuss the possibility that the ‘de-differentiation between the experience and appreciation of the sublime’ in surfing (Stranger 2011: 178) has facilitated a distinct relationship with the natural world that gives surf writers the opportunity to theorise and record space differently. It will then explore how this distinct way of seeing the world, underscored by surfing’s de-realisation of fear (179) has influenced Winton’s own articulation of the surf experience. After positioning his writing within this context, this chapter will assert that Winton’s work demonstrates a romantic association with the South Western Australian coast that is consistent with a postmodern sublime in which the practice and observation of the surfing act are merged. This chapter will conclude that despite a partial simplification of the notion of the sublime within surf media culture, surf writing such as Winton’s is important for its ability to retell the surf experience, exploring specifically the unique relationship with nature that a surfing life creates.

Purple and blue, the lurid shadows of the hollow breakers are cast upon the mist of night, which gathers cold and low, advancing like the shadow of death upon
the guilty ship as it labours amidst the lightning of the sea, its thin masts written upon the sky, in lines of blood, girded with condemnation in that fearful hue which signs the sky with horror and mixes its flaming flood with the sunlight, and, cast far along the desolate heave of the sepulchral waves, incardines the multitudinous sea (Ruskin in Loyd 1996: 31).

As the above excerpt from art critic John Ruskin indicates, conceptualisations of the sublime typically suggest nature’s ability to evoke profound and visceral emotions with the effect of emphasising our small place in the world. The ‘sublime’ is vast and uncontrolled, carrying with it the thrill of danger and promise of transcendent experience (Loyd 1996: 13).

This sense of the transformative power of nature sat at the core of the 19th Century Romantic movement. As Nick suggests, the Romantic conception of being ‘was a reaction to an emphasis on science, and order’ (Ford & Brown 2006: 12). For the Romantics, landscapes were seen as ‘reoccurring symbols of wild nature beyond the stifling control of reason.’ It was the sea itself, however, that had an almost elevated role in evoking the ‘astonishment, mental panic and momentary amazement’ of the sublime (Ford & Brown 2006: 11, 12). For Edmund Burke it was the ocean that ‘produced the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling’ (Burke 1958: 46) Similarly, for Immanuel Kant, ‘it was the sea agitated by storms that lent itself to the presentation of a sublimity discoverable in the mind’ (Kant in Riding 2013). Significantly, these perceptions of the ocean as perhaps the best embodiment of nature’s sublimity provide a strong case for conceptualising surfing within these terms.
Tim Winton’s popular 2008 novel *Breath*, celebrated as a triumph in surf writing also strengthens the case for exploring surfing in this way (Knox 2008). Following two young boys, Pikelet and Loonie’s discovery of surfing and their ongoing relationship with the coast and adventure, the novel uses the sea and its various moods to tell a larger story about memory and the frivolousness of youth. While dwelling in the beauty and fear of nature, *Breath* is a coming of age story. As Winton’s two main characters grow older and differences between them emerge, the coast and their surfing adventures assume a greater significance as the two begin to look at their small-town worlds differently. Winton’s writing in *Breath* displays a fixation with the coast and its changes. In keeping with Romantic conceptions of the sea as an embodiment of the sublime, descriptions of surfing in the novel emphasise the beautiful power of the ocean.

On TV I’d seen elephants run beside safari jeeps, pounding along at incredible speed while seeming to move in slow motion, and that’s exactly how it was: hectic noise, immense force driven up through the feet and knees, all in a kind of stoptime (Winton 2008: 48).

Such passages in *Breath* indicate Winton’s appropriation of the romantic sublime to essentialise the surfing experience along the South Western coast of Australia. In fact Winton himself admits to the strong influence romantic writers had in fostering his relationship with nature:

It was the real recluses who stirred my imagination. Enchanted by Blake and Wordsworth and steeped in the eremitic character of religious history… I found their stubborn isolation irresistible (Winton 2015: 131).
Indeed, given Winton’s appreciation of Blake and Wordsworth it is unsurprising that in *Breath* he positions the surfing experience as an overwhelmingly visceral one. According to Malcolm Knox, so strong are ‘those emotions [of] fear and ecstasy associated with the sublime in *Breath* [that] they may even answer why Winton writes about surfing in the first place’ (2008). Certainly, at times, Winton describes the ocean in almost malevolent terms, demonstrating its significance beyond the mere picturesque:

> Mountains of water rose from the south; they rumbled by, gnawing at themselves, spilling tons of foam, and the half-spent force of the water tore at my dangling legs. There was just so much water moving out there, such an overload of noise and vibration; everything was at a scale I could not credit (2008: 93).

While passages epitomising the intensity of surfing moments in nature punctuate Winton’s writing, surfing’s very involved relationship with its environment would also suggest that essentialisations of the surfing experience rely on a more progressed concept of sublimity that acknowledges surfing’s ‘oneness’ with the natural world (Stranger 2011: 178). As such, *Breath* recalls Bourke’s own conception of sublimity as being characterised more by ‘darkness, obscurity, privation or vastness than… idealism focused on pure beauty’ (Riding 2013: 69).

This shift in perspective from observer to participant occurs frequently in Winton’s writing suggesting a belief that the surfing experience may in some way alter how people see and interact with the world. In particular, the juxtaposition of characters’ descriptions of surfing in *Breath* reveals a contrast in how nature is perceived before
and after surfing. In the early stages of the novel, Pikelet’s dramatic observations of surfing predate his practice of the sport and are told from an onlooker’s perspective.

The rocks along the point were awash so high up that we were forced back into the scrub to stay safe and dry… there’d be a horrible ball of foam a snarl of limbs and a board shooting skyward… Thrilled and appalled, we could sit there for hours. It was our colosseum (2008: 27).

However, as Pikelet learns to surf, these passages are increasingly replaced by recollections that fuse an appreciation of surfing with Pikelet’s own lived experience. Deliberate or not, these shifting perspectives are evidenced by Pikelet’s evolving surfing vocabulary, allowing *Breath* to fluctuate between an almost traditional sublime in which the writer is removed from the landscape and to what Mark Stranger describes as a sublime characterised by surfing’s fusion of experience and observation and its de-realisation of fear of the ocean (Stranger 2011). These differences are further compounded by Winton’s use of peripheral characters such as Sando, whose attitudes toward the ocean counter Pikelet’s own thinking at any given time: ‘Least you’re honest, Pikelet. But scared of what? Water over sand? A bit of a sinus flush? What’s to be scared of out there at the point?’ (2008: 72)

This theme of fear and the tension between being in or out of the water also positions surfing in *Breath* as a heterotopic space in which access to the waves and the experiences that come with them is either gained via ritual or through permission (Johnson 2006). This shift toward the practice of surfing over merely its observation in *Breath*, points to how surfing evolves Pikelet’s and Loonie’s perception of coastal
space and the implications this transition creates for understanding and conveying the surf experience in its totality. For Stranger,

(a) de-differentiation between the appreciation of the sublime (in gazing at surfing) and the experience of the sublime (in the act of surfing) blurs the boundaries between the imagined and reality... indicating a distinctly postmodern hyperreality (2011: 178).

The creation of a new sublime relationship with nature achieved through surfing would therefore also present unique spatial opportunities for writers in that practiced and imagined space coalesce. This repositioning of the sublime is also consistent with Lash’s notion of a postmodern aesthetic ‘operating through the spectator’s immersion and the relatively unmediated investment of his desire in the cultural object’ (Lash 1990: 175). As these views would suggest, surfing narratives that thematise the sublime can be distinguished by the prevalence of the practitioner-writer over the spectator and are characterised by ‘an appreciation of beauty, from the minute details and changes in colour and form, to the epic grandeur of the sea’ (Stranger 2011: 161).

Interestingly, attempts by early romantic painters to embed themselves within the scenes they recorded would indicate that this notion of participation in the sublime is not unique to surfing. Rather, it appears to convey a pre-existing desire among artists to capture the ‘admirable truthfulness’ such a relationship could create (Lloyd 1996: 34). Furthermore, such works provide an indication of the challenges that communicating ‘lived experience’ create (Flynn 1987: 401).
In William Turner’s *Snow Storm – Steam-Boat off a Harbour’s Mouth Making Signals in Shallow Water, and going by the Lead*, swirling brushstrokes reminiscent of cloud and spray obscure a vessel positioned in the centre of the canvas. It is a chaotic painting, made while its artist was allegedly lashed to the mast.

As the surfer-writer describes surfing from the realm of lived experience, Turner’s choice to embed himself within this scene while adding depth to romanticism’s view of the ocean as boundless and irresistible (Ford & Brown 2006: 12) also forces us to reassess the purported benefits to conveying meaning that such proximity creates.
Significantly, Turner’s painting was dismissed by critics at the time, described as ‘soapsuds and whitewash’ and disparaged for being too close to its subject (Lloyd 1996: 34). The resistance it met would suggest that Turner’s fixation on being literally inside the moment might to some extent have undermined the chance his work had of being properly understood. This tension between clarity and proximity could also be extended to surf writing in that authors must balance a desire to zoom closer into the surfing act with the need to be comprehended by others. Indeed, compared with other paintings at the time that sought to communicate the ocean’s divine power, Turner’s work is hard to digest. Much like the triumphalist surf prose of the 1960s and 70s that sought to recreate the euphoric sensations of the surfing moment (Warshaw 2010: 56), the viewer feels an urge to pull back in order to better contemplate the scene. This issue of comprehension recalls Edmund Burke’s views on the sublime, warning of the dangers of proximity:

> When danger or pain press too nearly, they are incapable of giving any delight, and are simply terrible; but at certain distances, and with certain modifications, they may be, and they are delightful (Burke 1958: 40).

Significantly, these views on the absoluteness of danger also begin to distinguish Bourke’s attitudes toward the sublime from those held by writers including Winton, for whom terror in nature is mediated by an ability to see purpose and function in the chaos of the water (Stranger 2011:163). Indeed, fearfulness in surfing and our ability to overcome it are strong themes in Breath, demonstrated by the persistent polarity between Loonie’s crazy antics and Pikelet’s more restrained surfing. This idea is
perhaps best demonstrated early in the novel by Pikelet’s narration of an especially
dramatic surfing session:

That day I went back across to the bombora and rode two waves. Together
those rides wouldn't add up to more than half a minute of experience, of
which I can only recall a fraction: flickering moments, odd details. Like the
staccato chat of water against the board. A momentary illusion of being at
the same level as the distant cliffs. The angelic relief of gliding out onto the
shoulder of the wave in a mist of spray and adrenaline. Surviving is the
strongest memory I have the sense of having walked on water (Winton 2008:
95).

This passage in *Breath* also illuminates the relationship between surfing’s sensory
nature and surf writers’ tendencies for spiritual verbosity. Winton’s work is certainly
far from the writing typical of surf writing in the past, which Knox describes as the
‘cod-metaphysical school of paddle in the troughs and cruise on the crests’ (Knox
2008: 59). In fact, *Breath*’s exploration of the sublime is fairly contained, pressing
less heavily on a profligate assessment of the natural world.

In returning to the notion of fear, Winton’s decision to name his novel *Breath* is also
significant, invoking the frailty of human life and surfers’ abilities to persevere in
situations ‘incapable of giving any delight’ (Burke 1958: 40). Therefore while fear is
frequently addressed in *Breath*, alluding to Winton’s partial appropriation of the
romantic sublime, his characters’ ability to find pleasure in terrifying moments
would provoke the consideration that sublimity is somehow different in the context
of surfing.
He could describe the weird, reptilian thing that happened to you: the cold, supercharged certainty which overtook your usually dithering mind, the rest of the world in a slow motion blur around you, the tunnel vision, the surrender that confidence finally become. And when he talked about the final rush, the sense of release you felt at the end, skittering out to safety in the beautiful deep channel (Winton: 2008: 111).

Moreover, these passages in *Breath* would reaffirm the idea that the sublime in surfing may be characterised by participation, not simply observation.

This re-imagination of fear within the context of surfing experience would also approximate us to the notion of the ‘surfer’s gaze’ in which the surf experience resides in our expectation of that very experience, not so much within a specific time and place. Additionally, it would also underscore surfing’s ability to create unique impressions of the world extending to a ‘state of anticipatory resoluteness where past, present (and) future are unified’ (Flynn 1987: 402). While surfing derealises fear through its engagement with and knowledge of nature, the act also dissolves the boundaries of time and space rendering the appreciation of the sublime an ongoing process. A dissolution of spatial and temporal boundaries, and surfers’ abilities to read the coast as a text would then invite us to question surfing’s temporality and how, subsequently, this could be expressed in writing (Ford & Brown 2006: 17). As Rojek asserts, ‘there is no longer any basis for determining the local from the global or real space, from fictional or fantasy space’ (1995: 147). This would suggest that the potency of our attraction to surfing is explained as much by our imaginative capacities
as remembered experience. It would also remind us of Romantic poetry’s claim that ‘the poet must transcend the limitations of the logical, visual or geographic’ as ‘his preoccupation was with the use of it [landscape] for he did want to use it, not just look at it and record it’ (Lutwack 1984: 14).

It is possible that this erosion of spatial boundaries also acts to create an extended surf consciousness (Thrift 1997: 147) in that while surf communications may threaten to trivialise the sublime experience or isolate non-surfing audiences, surfers may rely on these communications to recreate or ‘simulate the self-transcendence experienced in surfing’ (Stranger 2011: 178). Viewing or reading surfing, as much as the act of surfing itself, would then seem to be about self-gratification and filling the moments in between (Taylor 2008: 932). As one surfer notes, ‘I surf for the same reason I perpetually flog myself to the heights of orgasmic pleasure — because it feels good’ (Brisick cited in Booth 1995: 205).

In Breath, Winton would seem equally aware of this possibility. Here, Pikelet’s magazine-like comparison of perfect surf conditions demonstrates the pervasive influence surf communications have on the surfing imagination and consequent impact on surfers’ ability to understand their experiences: ‘The wave at Barney’s wasn’t huge but it was long and perfect: blue, pure, empty. It was like something from a magazine and we were in it’ (2008: 73).

While epitomising surfing’s imaginative tendencies, this scene also demonstrates the powerful role of stereotype in surfing and will be revisited in chapter two to explore how certain tropes influence our communication of the surfing experience.
In going back to a discussion of the fluid and experiential nature of the sublime, Winton’s highly sentimental relationship with South Western Australia, expressed in much of his writing, recalls the temporal and spatial multiplicity that such an involved relationship creates. While certain passages in Breath deal directly with the terror and awe of the surfing moment, shifting perspectives within Breath and Winton’s consistent return to his characters’ surfing imaginations suggest a more complex relationship with landscape fostered in Winton’s writing over time. In Island Home, for example, Winton declares:

> This place continues to impose. It imprints itself upon the body and in order to make sense of it, the mind is constantly struggling to catch up… there is so much more of it than us. We are forever battling to come to terms (Winton 2015: 20).

Similar to Kant’s perception of the sublime ‘as a mental condition’ (Kant in Riding 2013), it is possible that Winton immortalised his own feelings toward the coast in his dramatisations of his characters’ surfing worlds. Further on in Island Home, Winton notes:

> Surfing was not just my escape, it was my way into a place that had previously felt as if it were resisting me. This was the beginning of my lifelong love of the southern coast and its hinterland (Winton 2015: 74).

Similar to images in surf magazines that simplify or aestheticise the sublime to promote surfing (Stranger 2011: 158), the sublime in Winton’s writing, specifically...
within *Breath*, could be seen to serve an equally functional purpose, preserving the South Western Australia coast in the writer’s mind’s eye. According to Smith, this distinction between visual and written forms of communicating the sublime is significant and may explain why so much is at stake in the context of surf writing.

The word is more successful in evoking the sublime because it is so radically different from what it seeks to describe, whereas the visual image, while having greater potential to represent forms which give rise to the experience of the sublime, risks collapse at the point of expression. The paradox of the visual is thus that it offers the promise of realising the sublime… but at the risk of descending into banality, formula or illustration (Smith in Riding 2013: 39).

In this context, given that words possibly create deeper and more lasting impressions than images, the advantage for writers such as Winton would be to wrestle surfing’s truth back from popular culture and present it in less reductive terms. If the surfing we see in magazines and on surf brand websites may tend toward trivialising surfing’s true experience, surf writing, particularly in *Breath*, may be significant for its ability to communicate the surfing experience in its totality.
Surfing Stereotypes

Surf writing in surfing magazines often tends toward segmenting surfing into commonly celebrated stages. These surf stories, in publications such as *Surfing World*, *Tracks Magazine* and *Surfer*, demonstrate a pervasive and limiting regurgitation of surfing’s most commonly accepted experiences. For Colleen McGloin these ‘generic conventions inscribe a certain set of signifiers often seductive to readers’ and are dominant in much of modern surf communication’ (2012: 110). Among these conventions, the fetishisation of surf travel and an obsession with finding the perfect wave have been particularly dominant, resulting in a raft of surfing clichés (Joyce 2011). As Taylor notes ‘Almost every issue of the hundreds of surfing magazines has photographs or other graphics that reprise the Edenic theme, and show pristine beaches, waves, and ocean-loving communities. The accompanying articles normally feature pilgrimages to such places’ (Taylor 2007: 993). Much like attempts to essentialise the surfing moment in terms of the sublime, these themes have often resulted in an oversimplification of the sport, locating the surfing experience in increasingly narrow terms (Baker 2007).

After discussing two of surfing’s most pervasive clichés this chapter will examine how these themes have been treated in Winton’s *Breath*. It will argue that despite the inherent limitations of these clichés, they offer writers unique opportunities to
reconsider surfing’s relationship to experience and space. The chapter concludes by asserting surf writing’s value as type of writing position or way of viewing the world where a reconsideration of the boundaries of the surf experience create value in exploring surfing’s more mundane, everyday elements.

The Travel Archetype
Despite the purported differences between surf narratives (most notably that they occur in a variety of remarkable locations) these stories have become highly predictable. As Warshaw explains, ‘… surf articles were a mixed bag. The photos were great. The writing was awful’ (2010: 302). This phenomenon can be simply demonstrated by examining article titles within June’s 2016 edition of Surfing World magazine.
‘Cheap Thrills in the African North West’, ‘Finding Solace’ and ‘The Staggering and Un-ridden Potential for Surf Adventure in Papua New Guinea’ all point to a fixation on finding perfect waves in novel environments (Blakey (ed) 2016). Ultimately, the rehashing of the same themes in these stories suggest a codification of surfing communication whereby surfers’ unique and highly personal engagements with the natural world are oversimplified and marginalised (Warshaw 2010: 310).

Similarly, study of surf videos on surf magazine and surf brand websites also reveals a number of filmic conventions that corroborate this tendency toward homogenisation. The airport shot in which a lone surfer sits, surrounded by people of other nationalities, is an example of pervasive notions of solitude and otherness.
Scenes of surfers hauling board bags through airport lines or battling with foreign customs staff convey an experience that is easily understood by other surfers (*The Drifter* 2009). However, these moments do not adequately express the relationships surfers build with their surfing surrounds.

Secondly, wide-angle landscape shots in which the country of the destination wave is implied through stereotypical imagery such as rice fields, palm trees, camels or snow enforce the idea of movement, indicating a certain relationship that may exist between surfers and their surrounds (*The Path of the Modern Gypsy* 2011). However, as Stranger explains,

> Contemporary surfing film and video productions rarely stray for more than a few seconds from their depiction of waves, surfing and idyllic coastal setting, and when they do, it is often in fast motion. The world apart from surfing is typically portrayed as frantic, comical, to be dealt with as swiftly as possible (2011: 168).

While surfing films may hint at the geographic discovery inherent to surfing, the fleeting nature of these shots combined with their juxtaposition with scenes of surfers ‘tearing apart’ their desired waves diminish any real consideration of surfing’s broader environment, and certainly fall short of providing any insight into surfing’s real value.

While ‘short, plotless, [surf videos] possessing no real order’ (Warshaw 2010: 383), arguably perpetuate narrow views of surfing, especially those produced by surf brands themselves, certain works of film seem to have succeeded in unpacking the wider, cartographic implications of the surfing life. Both *Endless Summer* (1966) and
*Endless Summer Two* (1994), in which a group of surfers embark on journeys to uncover and surf the earth’s greatest waves, demonstrate an approach that places the surfing act within a larger theme of adventure. In fact surfing is conveyed as the catalyst of adventure, not simply the subject of it. In the opening scenes of *Endless Summer Two*, itself a homage to *Endless Summer One*, surfers Pat and Wingnut are depicted reviewing topographical maps in their home. These early scenes in which surfers’ journeys are represented in far greater detail indicate the potential of the travel narrative to communicate surfing in a more complex and interesting way. Furthermore, the use of maps in these scenes is also significant because it highlights the fluidity of space in surfing in which real, imagined and recorded space coalesce. Indeed, while travel stereotypes may have paradoxically narrowed the scope of surf storytelling, the sport’s intrepid characteristics that require waves to be found to be surfed would suggest the benefit of movement in allowing surfers to inhabit and record the world differently.

*Endless Summer* highlighted the potential for surf films to explore the notion of travel in surfing with more depth and complexity (Warshaw 2010). Certain literary works have similarly foregrounded benefits of communicating through this prism. Significantly, the article ‘Centro America’ published in *Surfer* magazine in 1973 seemed almost to ignore the surfing act. Instead, the article focused on the immense task of actually getting to waves and negotiating unfamiliar social and cultural contexts along the way (Naughton 2015). According to Warshaw:

Good waves came into the picture at fairly regular intervals, but the heart of the Naughton-Peterson experience was found in the cantinas and beachfront tents,
around the campfires, in a hammock and under the hood of yet another broken down car (2010: 303).

Here, surfing in ‘Centro America’ seemed more of a reason or excuse to travel rather than an overt subject. For Warshaw, ‘Centro America’ ‘changed the emphasis’ on what surfing was by ‘documenting the trials and tribulations of vagabond travel’ (2010: 303).

(Photograph by Craig Peterson in Naughton 2015)

So, while ‘travel was the great unifier (and) every surfer loved dreaming about it, planning it, doing it and telling the stories afterward’ (2010: 300), the regurgitation of narratives repeatedly positioning novel countries, places and people as the ‘Other’ have resulted in the persistence of this dominant cliché in surf storytelling. Fuelled by
surf brands and the sport’s monetisation, these narratives have diminished our ability to speak about and understand surfing in other ways (Ford & Brown 2006). For McGloin, the singularity of surfing communication is exemplified by the fetishisation or removal of indigenous people from surf narratives. For McGloin, the naturalisation of the ‘overseas surfing escapade as a practice’ has been ‘normalized within surfing culture and its associated texts’, resulting in one dimensional, ‘white’, accounts of the sport (2012: 112).

**Perfection as a Reoccurring Theme**

The quest for perfection has overwhelmingly permeated surf collective oeuvre, emerging as surfing’s most powerful cliché (Warshaw 1997). Indeed, surf photography is fixated on this pursuit and nothing stokes the excitement of surfing audiences more than images of faultless, virgin waves (Stranger 2011: 169). The publication of coffee table books with titles such as *Visions of the Breaking Wave* (Carroll (ed) 2008), and special edition surf magazines displaying images of these aspirational moments accompanied with little to no text, demonstrate a preference for visual communication, suggesting the reluctance or inability of surf writers to create similar impressions with words. For Stranger, this phenomenon is explained in part by ‘aesthetisation through the culture industry produces(ing) a flow of signs and images that saturate everyday life to such a degree that they defy systemisation and narrativity’ (2011: 158).
Surf brands, charter operators and surf magazines deify this notion of perfection as well as the literal use of the word, indicating the potency of aspiration in surfing (Ford and Brown 2006). Renowned surf brand Rip Curl’s tagline ‘The Search’ embodies this very idea, suggesting that these cues are not merely confined to being understood and celebrated by surfing audiences. Rather, they have enormous economic potential in selling a romanticised surfing life.

(Rip Curl 2017)

While finding and riding great waves may be surfing’s ostensible objective (Baker 2007), this fixation may have diminished surf literature’s ability to focus on anything else. In recognition of this tension, Warshaw notes, ‘there really isn’t that much to say about great waves, the photos pretty much took care of that’ (Warshaw 2010: 303).
In *Breath*, Winton also alludes to the ways in which surf imagery has dominated surfing’s understanding of itself. In describing the wave at Barney’s, a long point haunted by a 5-metre great white, Pikelet seems more comfortable with referencing a surfing magazine than using his own words (‘It was like something from a magazine and we were in it’ (2008: 73)). While Pikelet’s decision to articulate his experience through comparison would indicate Winton’s awareness of the prevalence of photography in surfing communication it also implies a universal understanding of what surf magazines are about. This reliance on the narrative devices of popular surfing culture also points to Ford and Brown’s argument that participants of extreme sports find it difficult to verbally express what they do, deferring to ‘a sense of shared embodied knowledge which takes on the form of a feeling of communitas’ (2006: 163). In this sense, Pikelet’s experience at Barney’s, would indicate how individual surfing lives and dominant surf culture intersect. Winton effectively widens the aperture of surf writing by exploring surfing’s dominant cultural elements alongside specific surfing moments, flitting frequently between the two to underscore the wider significance of the surfing experience.

After considering how a fixation on perfection and the aesthetisation of travel has undermined the communication of surfing’s full experience, it is important to consider how these themes could be better employed in surf writing.

**Travel and Perfection in the Mind**

The article ‘Mapping Moments’, recently published in popular Australian surf magazine *Paper Sea Quarterly*, provides some indication of how this relationship can
be revisited. In the article, Geall asserts that ‘Surfers are mapmakers. We create, nurture and build narratives around our favorite spots’ (2016: 163). For Geall, the surfing experience is one of subjective mapmaking, exploring the totality of space (2016: 164). He discusses the idiosyncratic ways that the Inuit people view their land and waters are not dissimilar to the approaches used by surfers in ‘evoking even the most seemingly insignificant minutiae’ within the natural environment’ (2016: 164). While these comments remind us of the exclusivity of surf language, they also suggest the benefit of surf travel to the writer. This notion of a unique observational position is also consistent with Ford & Brown’s idea of the ‘surfer’s gaze on the sea’ in which human encounters with the seashore represent a highly specific practice creating a distinct meaning and cognisance (Ford & Brown 2006: 17). They would also correspond with Preston-Whyte’s perception of the beach as an active text in which the ocean’s ever-changing conditions are studied and seen uniquely by surfers (2002). Surf travel may therefore offer a completely unique way of looking at new spaces, and it is in the way of looking that a literary opportunity lies.

Indeed, significant parallels can be found in Geall’s ‘Surfers Gaze’ and Winton’s own concept of what surfing is:

While waiting for the next set for the wind to change, or the tide to run, I had thousands of hours in which to notice things around me. I began to put them together geographically. Beaches for instance, were constantly subject to dynamic process. In fact seashore, now that I saw it clearly, was a live system. And so was a creek, a coastal heath, a forest. Even a blunt dolerite cliff was somehow in motion, under power, subject to endless force… Everything I saw was an unfinished and perpetually open-ended process (Winton 2015: 76).
Although Winton’s writing rarely strays from the South Western Australian landscape his obsession with the minutaie of the surfing experience would suggest that travel itself could be reduced to as much as the movement from one rock to another. The sheer detail extracted from simple beach expeditions in *Breath* juxtaposed by later accounts of Sando and Loonie’s Indonesia trip described in vague, abstracted terms would reinforce this possibility (2008: 168).

Looking at travel in these terms would also align with Gaell’s exploration of surfing’s cartographic underpinnings and his argument that surfers’ acquire knowledge through their senses (Flynn 1987). As Dorian Paskowitz asserts, ‘There is a wisdom in the wave…’ (in Baker 2007: 01). The literary implication of this reframing of travel would be that in contrast to narratives fixated on exoticism, surfer writers could instead articulate in detail the intricate ways they move through the world. Surfing would therefore be ‘an assemblage, [a] machination of a multiplicity of elements…’ (Ford & Brown 2006: 162). This approach offers the potential for recording overseas or long distance travel in this way, and strengthens arguments for the reexamination of more mundane and everyday experiences.

As Winton’s close up view of the world suggests, there are certainly other ways to think about surf travel that fall outside the palm-trees-and-airport-queues narrative convention. For Baker, these possibilities extend beyond a discussion of location and allude to structuring the surf experience as ‘a classic three-part story’ in which characters meet in a real environment, experience an extraordinary world fraught with
challenges and finally return to their original surrounds equipped with a newfound understanding or knowledge (2009).

Here, Baker asserts the structural possibilities that may accompany surfing’s more detailed way of looking at the world. Rather than lumping surfers into generic new environments and hearing about what happens after, the focus is upon the transformational experiences that a life of surfing creates. For Baker surfing’s significance, even in the context of physical movement, derives from its lasting impact on the mind. This possibility for Knox would then position surf writing within the boundaries of epic literature, in which the movement inherent to surfing drives the personal transformations of characters. In a review on *Breath*, Knox claims that

> The surfing narrative, whether lived or written, follows the lines of epic literature. New, frightening challenges rear up. Once conquered, they unveil a newer, scarier challenge. Having mastered the Point, Loonie and Pikelet surf Barney's, a break with a resident white pointer, then the thundering deep water reef break Old Smokey, and finally an almost-unsurfable frontier break called the Nautilus (Knox 2008: 15).

Whether or not we subscribe to Knox’s views, we can acknowledge the possibility that surfing’s value lies beyond its immediate context. Therefore, while novel locations underscore narratives of travel in surf writing, exploring the act of movement and its relationship to change represents a positive and constructive change to the genre (Serong 2011). This possibility also brings into question the relevance of distance to travel, recalling Winton’s ability to imbue even the simplest and shortest of surf expeditions with meaning (Winton 2008, 65).
While Winton’s characters meander in and out of the ocean in *Breath*, surfing when the conditions permit, the novel also moves away from the sea to focus on their domestic lives. Here we rediscover similarities with ‘Centro America’ in that both authors seem to recognise the dangers of dwelling solely on the waves. Interestingly, the same conditions that deprive *Breath*’s protagonists of adventure enables readers to detach themselves from the surfing act to look at life around it. Scenes of Loonie and Pikelet splitting logs behind the pub and pulling splinters from their hands at night so effectively reflect the boys’ frustration and giddy excitement to return back to the water that they arguably become expressions of surf writing themselves (Winton 2008: 65). There is a feeling that the ocean has created a vacuum around these boys and that everything they see and touch on dry land is relative or comparable somehow to that last ride. So profound is this connection that Pikelet’s adult character, looking back on his days as a boy, declares,

> Though I’ve lived to be an old man with my own share of happiness... I still judge every joyous moment, every victory and revelation against those few seconds of living (Winton 2008: 33).

Surfing is therefore largely relational, and it is the tension it creates with the mundane that piques the interest. By injecting surfing into scenes otherwise entirely removed from that world, Winton conveys surfing’s weight on the mind of his characters and intimates at the fluidity of time and space in the surfing experience where the real and imagined are blurred. This situation of surfing in other contexts also functions to
reposion the experience, allowing Winton to use language otherwise unfamiliar to dominant surfing narratives.

The town of Sawyer, mill and even Pikelet’s father in *Breath* are negative symbols of the boys’ love of water. We discover that surfing is not so much an activity as it is a prolonged state of wanting, a life that Winton himself describes as fraught with frustration and desperation (Winton 2015). This leads us to consider that any essentialisation of surfing is antithetical to the sport’s idealisation. Moreover, as Winton and Baker’s views on surf writing suggest, it may even be those moments where surfers are not in the water that best communicate the sport.

Indeed, the frustrations of surfing life in *Breath* are consistently incubated and delivered back to the reader. Much in the way surfers mimic the movements of waves when watching surf videos, exemplifying a desired ‘oneness’ with the water (Anderson 2014), readers of *Breath* experience the inherent torture of expectations of surfing as Loonie and Pikelet’s lives shift between action and anticipation, doing and reflecting (Winton 2015: 75).

The ‘episodic, mercurial and intermittent experience’ (Capp 2003: 54) of surfing in *Breath* where the boys spend as much time waiting on Sando’s front steps as they do in the water indicate Winton’s use of the trope to dissect the peculiarity of small town relationships, possibly even his own youth (7:30 Report 2008). As Australian surf novelist Fiona Capp asserts, surfing is ‘a metaphor for understanding and experiencing the world… a life force that connects all things’ (Capp 2005: 197). Therefore, alongside revealing some of Winton’s motivations for writing about
surfing, these ideas also allude to surfing’s inherent temporal peculiarities. They arguably suggest that the surfing experience is perhaps never over, and despite the fact that waves occupy mere minutes of our surfing lives (Baker 2007), their ongoing recreation in our minds indicate a timelessness that problematises the parameters of surf literature. This notion of the elasticity of the surfing experience is perhaps best conveyed in the opening voice over of the 1973 surf film, *Crystal Voyager*.

You might be in there for only a few seconds in real time but in your head it goes on for hours. It’s an experience that’s hard to describe, riding inside the eye of a big grinding wave. Often, you’re riding so deep inside the tube you don't make it out. You take a terrible wipeout, but what matters is when you’re in there. It's a time warp when you’re inside the wave. Time enters a space, a zone of its own. The only reality is what's happening right then (Crystal Voyager 1973).

And while these attempts to convey the nature of the surfing also indicate the type of language surfers employed to describe their experiences in the 60s and 70s, the narrator George Greenough’s comments reinforce the possibility that surfing’s relationship with time and experience is quite unique.

Coupled with the view that travel narratives may be diminishable to smaller moments, these ideas give substance to Geall’s proposition of the totality of space (2016: 163). Going a step further, it would also suggest that surfing’s partial amelioration of physical space in favour of imagined space poses a threat to conventional narrative techniques that have essentialised the surfing experience in the past (Anderson 2014: 29). Heterotopian perspectives that see space as neither here nor there may also
support this view, demonstrating how surfing spaces are not simply physical (Foucault 1967). In particular, Foucault’s fourth heterotopic principle, which sees a relationship between space and time in which space is quasi eternal, as in the case of galleries or museums, or fleeting, in the way of markets or festivals (and indeed waves), would support this view that surfing may be predicated on imagined or remembered experience (Johnson 2006). Explaining his fourth principle Foucault notes:

The heterotopia enters fully into function when men find themselves in a sort of total breach of their traditional time... time in its more futile, transitory and precarious aspects, a time viewed as celebration (1997: 25).

This transition from physical to mental, exemplifying surfing’s fluid relationship to space, is also consistent with Leonard Lutwack’s assertion that,

All places whether drawn from geographical reality or fantasy, from literature or actual life, serve figurative ends and thereby sacrifice part of their concreteness as they cater to some human desire or craving beyond present reality (1984: 32).

The strong aspiration within surfing for perfection suggests that waves themselves are both oceanic phenomena and symbolic mental fabrications. Surfing’s repeated experience could therefore create a type of collective viewpoint, connecting otherwise discordant experiences (Lutwack 1984: 31). Regardless of whether Lutwack’s position can be applied entirely to a spatial discussion on surfing, the possibility of symbolic, non-physical places in surfing prompt us to consider how else, and in fact,
where else the surfing experience may be communicated. Again we are reminded of Winton’s tendency to communicate surfing through the emotional states of his characters, not so much through the surfing moment itself.

In the tradition of ‘Centro America’ and Endless Summer, Breath demonstrates a stretching out of the surf moment in which dramatic events are elasticised into symbols conveying meaning. In fact, accentuating this distinction between the physical and mental, certain writers have acknowledged that ‘surfing could symbolise something much larger than the act itself… it could transcend culture and place’ (Capp 2005: 203). Despite the negative implications of stereotype to surf communication, the tropes of travel and perfection do at least demonstrate surfing’s confusion of time and place. These themes, and their recurrence within surf writing, allow us to position the surf experience alongside Lutwack’s views on spatiality and Ford and Brown’s notion of the surfer’s gaze. Furthermore, these stereotypes encourage surf writers to confront the boundaries of surf literature and the possibility that surf writing may in fact be a perspective of its own. As Winton’s writing paradoxically suggests, there may be something bigger to be found within the sport’s mundane, everyday aspects.
Memory and Language in Surf Writing

I don’t need paper and ink, I need a 24-karat gold monster cable speaker wire
with one end plugged into backdoor Pipeline and the other soldered into your
adrenal gland. I need elongated vowel sounds and exaggerated hand movements
(Warshaw 2004: 20).

When surf journalist Mike McGinty said these words, he was, with typical
flamboyance, conveying the difficulty of articulating what surfing is. Perhaps nothing
else haunts surfers as much as the question of ‘what is surfing like?’ (Anderson 2012).
Asking this question invokes the silent agreement among surfers that such
explanations are futile (Anderson 2012: 580). Indeed, while communicating surfing is
complicated given the inherent ‘difficulties in verbally expressing the nature of the
surfing experience’ (Ford and Brown 2006: 163), the act of writing is perhaps the
most problematic as writers must rely on words in isolation to articulate a subject that
defies narration (Knox 2008: 16).

The challenges of narrating surfing are therefore twofold. Firstly, the act of surfing is
itself an anomalous one that has dumbfounded its observers since its introduction into
Western society:
I did not conceive it possible but that some of them must be dashed to mummy against the sharp rocks, but just before they reach the shore, if they are very near, they quit their plank & dive under till the surf is broke. By such like exercises, these men may be said to be almost amphibious (Cook in Marcus 2010).

This idea of surfing’s uniqueness, however, is further exemplified by its apparent difference to other wave-riding forms that rely on more limited connections between the human body and surf craft (Flynn 1987). For Ford, this idea of connection and freedom positions surfing in a place of its own in which a con-aesthesia of balance and rhythm and capacity for the body to dance underpin the act (2006: 149). Early descriptions of surfing in Breath emphasising surfing’s performative nature also contribute to this idea of the sport’s uniqueness.

How strange it was to see men do something beautiful. Something pointless and elegant, as though nobody saw or cared… but for me there was still the outlaw feeling of doing something graceful, as if dancing on water was the best, bravest thing a man could do (Winton 2008: 24).

While certain aspects of surfing distinguish it as a truly unique sport, a consideration of the ‘changing symbolisms and representations of the sea and coastscape’ over time (Ford and Brown 2006: 9) also helps us understand the difficulties inherent in understanding and communicating surfing. Alain Corbin observes that before contemporary fondness of the seashore emerged in the West in the nineteenth century, exemplified by the popular practice of sea-bathing, the ocean had long been a site of intense mystery and danger. In the spirit of the romantic sublime, the sea represented a site of divine chaos, a ‘non-terrestrial’ landscape over which humans had no control.
(Corbin 1994). If people did look at the ocean outside the prism of economic gain, it was seen as a spectacle. It was certainly not a place for people to go and immerse themselves (Ford and Brown 2006: 10).

Therefore, surfing’s uniqueness has meant that in addition to simply recording surfing, writers have had the difficult task of imbuing the activity with some kind of narrative meaning. While it could be said that literature’s task is to convey messages beyond mere descriptions of the world, this challenge of creating meaning has haunted writers seeking to convey surfing’s point (Joyce 2011). For Stranger, ‘surfing has repeatedly been distinguished from many other sports in terms of its powerful aesthetic and cultural associations’ (2011: 156) and its con-aesthetic qualities render it unnecessary to justify the sport with any rational outcomes (156). Therefore, removing the rational influences of competition and sponsorship means that surfing’s lack of measurable outcomes is precisely what makes it inherently worthwhile (Baker 2007). Indeed for Winton, this view would premise surfing’s importance on the very idea that it is pointless. And that ‘there is no material result from two hours spent surfing. All the benefits are intangible, except perhaps the calibration of mood’ (2016: 134).

These assertions that ‘surfing is a completely pointless exercise’ (Winton 2016: 129) that emphasise the sport’s absolute difference effectively place the onus on surf writers to make sense of, or repackage, a highly individual and abstracted aesthetic experience. This challenge has subsequently encouraged a variety of literary approaches, reflecting the many ways surfing has been perceived over time. For Winton, however, surfing is perhaps most significantly a way into the landscape and a
new way of seeing the world (Winton 2015: 74). The writer counterbalances this position with an obvious skepticism toward modern surfing’s competitive nature. Winton explains:

But we surfed, many of us, with a sense of awe and a feeling of kinship with each other and the sea that sustained us. This was before surfing became merely another occupied territory, before it was completely commercialised and just another colony of the business world (Winton in Baker 2007: 40).

While a lack of efficacious outcomes established the conditions for surfing’s importance (Ford and Brown 2006: 156), it is arguably the freedom for contemplation this creates that is most significant for Winton. Furthermore, while surfers have often been dismissed as reprobates and their lifestyle choices deemed selfish, there is a marked difference for Winton between emptiness and meaninglessness (Winton 2016: 130). In building a case for the surfer, Winton describes surfing’s restorative power.

When life gets overwhelming it’s incredible what a few hours in the brine will do for you. It’s as though the ocean is this vast salty poultice that sucks the poison off of your system (Baker 2007:42).

For Ford however, the tension between understanding or experiencing surfing’s meditative power and expressing this to others sits as a core challenge at the heart of surf writing. By its very nature and despite its significance to the individual, surfing would seem to defy literary representation altogether, leaving us to question what hope writers have in talking about it at all. This seemingly unbridgeable gap between surfing’s embodied experience and its ability to ‘tell itself’ has resulted in a swathe of
literary failings exemplified by a lexicon of experiential terms designed to convey surfing’s truth (Ford & Brown 2006: 174). McGloin is also aware of these difficulties, noting, ‘as anyone who has ever read a surfing magazine will attest, (surfers) wax lyrical about the spiritual potential of the seascape and man’s re-connection to nature’ (2012: 110). This tension in communicating surfing was perhaps best demonstrated in the 60s and 70s, where the language of surf magazine articles seemed to mirror the experimentation that characterised that era more broadly (Warshaw 2010:306).


Indeed, Australian surf writers including Baker, Knox and Winton himself seem aware of how these language and surfing colloquialisms indicate surfing’s partial failure to ‘tell itself’ (Joyce 2011). ‘We spoke a lingo that puzzled our parents’, notes Winton (2016: 132). Despite this gap between conveyance and compression, Baker does suggest that when used modestly, surf jargon is useful for developing colour within a text (Baker 2008: 15). However, this assertion points more at the possibility that ‘surf’ language is better applied in describing surfing’s tendency toward verbosity in surf storytelling than in describing surfing itself.

Extending this discussion, Baker also observes that the limitations of surfing language have meant that writers are better placed to focus on characters and place more
broadly, leaving the moment itself to more immediate communication mediums like photography. In the contestation of the surfing moment, it would seem that writing would concede to surf photography’s immediacy in conveying the surfing act and employ its strengths to locate it within a broader, more significant narrative (Baker 2008). These suggestions, while proposing a shift in surf writing’s focus, would also avoid the difficulty of expressing a moment that defies explanation in literary terms. Moreover, this approach would also encourage writers to consider surfing in its wider context, recalling Winton’s use of surfing as a way of looking at the world as much as a subject in itself (Ford and Brown 2006: 163). In many ways, Baker’s approach to surf writing parallels Winton’s as both writers demonstrate a curiosity about what happens before or after the surf act. A practice at odds with the majority of ‘surf-writing, which repeatedly returns to the experience of wave riding as the sensual practice’ (Taylor 2007: 940).

In Breath, surfing moments are contextualised within the natural and social environment. This includes events core to surfing’s immediate experience, such as the arrival of new swells, communicated in scenes entirely removed from the coast.

Before the wind had even stirred the trees I knew I wasn’t ready… On the night the storm descended I lay in bed feeling the roof quake. For two days, black squalls ripped in from the sea and rain strafed the roads and paddocks and forest… I woke to a rumble that caused the house stumps to vibrate (Winton 2008: 141).
This approach would correspond with a tendency for coastal literature to treat the ocean as a metaphor for life, in which ‘the sea serves as a mirror to humankind and the human condition’ (Ford and Brown 2006: 12). Despite language’s struggle to capture the surfing moment (Medeiros in Anderson 2015: 230), perhaps the greatest challenge facing surfing literature has been an interpretive and representational disconnect between surfers and non-surfers themselves. ‘Non-surfers, it seemed to me, strove for symmetry, linear order, solid boundaries... What we craved was flow’ (Winton 2016: 132).

As the first chapter of this thesis indicated, the earliest versions of surf writing were written predominantly from the perspective of the non-surfer, describing surfing from an outsider’s perspective (Anderson 2012). Yet surfing’s meteoric growth in popularity in Western society, particularly in Australia and the United States, has meant that the artists and writers ‘doing’ surfing have increasingly been surfers themselves.

This perspectival shift from ‘surfing as spectacle… where writing is removed from the lived experience of the surfed wave’ (Anderson 2014: 31) to what Ford describes as ‘The Surfer’s Gaze’ (Ford and Brown 2006: 4) represents a significant transition from how surfing has been conveyed and understood. While the implications of this transition have been significant, surf literature has become an increasingly exclusive domain. It is possible that surfers’ appreciations of the aesthetic conditions of the coast-as-landscape and ‘awareness of the minutiae of ever-changing conditions’ (Preston-Whyte 2002) are not shared by non-surfers, lending weight to the catechism ‘only a surfer knows the feeling’ (Warshaw 2010). In the same way a foreign
language impedes our ability to understand someone from another country, so too could accounts written by surfers be lost on those unfamiliar to the sport.

According to Anderson, these tensions present a significant opportunity in that they encourage writers to build on language’s performative function to overcome such barriers.

To create holistic understanding, it is crucial to recognize the potential for all fragments of knowledge (after Bakhtin, 1994) to combine and dissolve the binaries between doing and reflection, thought and practice (Anderson 2014: 29).

Therefore, while surf writing in the hands of surfers themselves may be ‘self-congratulatory’ (Knox 2010) and tend toward reifying the divinity of the surf experience, it also threatens the possibility of viewing surfing in a broader context. This trap of ‘experiential’ surf writing illustrates the shortcomings of language in communicating truth (Ford and Brown 2006: 174), and is embodied in surfers’ associations between surfing and sex in which the riding of a wave is communicated and understood in the terms of ecstatic experience (Brisick in Booth 1995: 205). This possibility of a connection between surfing and sex is reinforced by McGloin who sees the sexualisation of surf language as indicating a ‘commonplace mysogny’ within surf communication (2012: 112). McGloin notes, ‘dramatic and often flowery descriptions of surfing’s ecstasy use terminologies such as “beautiful”, “mind blowing”, “breath-taking” and so on, descriptors often ascribed to a feminine literary lexicon’ (2012: 112).
As the writing of sex in fiction is commonly recognised as a fraught and tricky business (Porter 2000), so too has the writing of waves where surfers wax lyrical about the pleasures of being on or inside the water (Anderson). The ‘feminine’ qualities of the ocean itself, in that every swell possesses a unique and desirable shape and surfing’s ultimate objective is to be ‘in the tube’, has contributed further to this thematic preoccupation (Smith and Sparkes 2002). However, the danger of dwelling on surfing’s ‘divine moment’ is that in literary terms, this pursuit is inherently limiting. Perhaps it is no coincidence that in Winton’s Breath, Pikelet and Loonie’s discovery of surfing is mirrored by a scandalous sexual adventure in which Loonie is seduced by a woman three times his age (145). Here, Winton draws parallels between the characters’ formative experiences, suggesting an inherent similarity between them. The conquering of Old Smokey on a ‘grey, windless morning’ (2008: 99), for example, and Pikelet’s sexual encounter with Eva in the second half of the book both underpin the surfer’s infatuation with risk indicating a similarity with sex that may extend beyond mere aesthetics. It is also possible that Winton’s juxtaposition of surfing and sex within Breath may be a way of prodding at surf culture’s continued obsession with this analogy:

I was fifteen years old and afraid. Sex was, once more, a confounding mystery. I didn’t understand love or even physiology. I was so far out of my depth it frightens me now to recall it. Yes, I was scared but not nearly scared enough (2008: 184).

While ‘the allegorical use of sex to explain the surfing experience should be understood in terms of a blurring of boundaries between sex and spirituality’ (Stranger 2011: 173), it is also useful to consider how this relationship may force us
to question surfing’s temporality. If surfing were indeed like sex, these similarities would render it a momentary experience embodied by solitude and partial exclusion of the outside world. Furthermore, our relationship with surfing could then be underscored by a friction between performance and expectation. Like the fleeting nature of sexual encounters, our surfing lives may also be lived predominantly in the mind. The implication of this analogy is that surfing would cease to be a purely physical activity and instead be characterised by a predilection for the fantastical, mythical and imaginative (Ford and Brown 2006). As abundant analogies between surfing and sex would indicate, surfing’s pleasure is such that even in the absence of waves, they are never far from the surfer’s mind (Stranger 2007: 172). As champion Australian surfer Ross Clarke Jones describes,

> It’s like the aftermath of great sex – ah, I think I’ll have a cigarette. You crash out and then you’re just excited about it for days, years sometimes. You can bring that swell up in your mind and get excited about it again (Ross Clarke Jones in Baker 2007: 18).

In this context, the task of surf writing is increasingly complicated as writers must extrapolate individual experiences that are, at best, hard to remember, then stitch these together to create a story characterised by an ongoing desire. In many ways, Breath’s narrative seems to reflect this very approach in how surfing feats are retold through memory and exemplify a desire to relive the experience.

> That day I went back across to the bombora and rode two waves. Together those rides wouldn’t add up to more than half a minute of experience, of which I can only recall a fraction: flickering moments, odd details. (Winton 2008: 30)
While writing about surfing as a type of ‘ecstatic experience’ (Stranger 2011: 179) may approximate readers to the most dramatic aspects of surfing’s truth, this tendency in surf writing has paradoxically created a literature that, when set too narrowly against the surf moment, obscures any insight into what is actually going on. It is here, within this idea of a ‘flow state’, where the surfer’s mind is rendered blank by the extreme concentration required to stand on and ride a wave (Baker 2007: 44). However, most surf writing sits somewhere between a firsthand report and simultaneous fabrication of personal experience. For surf writer Malcom Knox,

The experience of standing on, through, and inside a wave is too mercurial for memory, too slippery for words. This is why surfing invites obsession and repetition, as if one faint wave-memory after another can accrete into a permanent idea (Knox 2008).

This idea also aligns with the confessions of surfers themselves,

I can never remember my best waves… You ride it without even really knowing what you're doing. And you get to the end and you're thinking. What did I just do? (Fanning in Knox 2008)

While these lapses underpin the corrosive relationship between memory and surfing, further muddying the task of essentialising surfing, they also exemplify the sheer uniqueness of the surfing act and attendant difficulty of representing it artistically. This idea is recurrent within Breath as Winton’s characters, both observers and practitioners of the act, struggle to make sense of what surfing is:
Sando and I could only watch on in awe. And there, when we came in, was the Angelis crew misted in on the cliff uncertain of what it was they’d seen (Winton 2008: 100).

Therefore, surfers’ struggles to understand and explain why they surf similarly pervade writing about surfing. In particular, the challenge of using language to articulate an activity that has eluded its own participants and observers has necessarily meant writing on the subject often fails to capture what surfing is. Compounding these shortcomings, surfing’s momentary nature would suggest that elements of the sport defy representation altogether, welcoming the question of what surf writing should focus on at all.

Set against an abundance of surf narratives that have struggled to explore surfing in an interesting way (Joyce 2011), these difficulties would suggest that the immediate task of surf writing would be to question how surfing is told and where the boundaries between the surfing moment and surfing’s broader implications can be reset.

As Winton’s writing would suggest, the remedy may well be to examine surfing’s wider context and locate it within our relationship with the natural world. Here, Ford’s idea of the surfer’s gaze would form the premise for a writing position that unpacks the myriad, complex implications of the surfing act rather than reductively recreate it.
Surfing and Place

The experience of standing on, through, and inside a wave is too mercurial for memory, too slippery for words. This is why surfing invites obsession and repetition, as if one faint wave-memory after another can accrete into a permanent idea (Knox 2008).

This statement by Australian writer Malcolm Knox exemplifies the inherent difficulty at the heart of surf writing (Joyce 2011). As the previous chapter asserted, this difficulty of representing moments that defy explanation means surf writers have frequently resorted to fictionalising their experiences. As such, tendencies toward spiritual prolixity, obsessions with ‘the moment’ in its isolation and overused surfing clichés in surf writing have collectively undermined surfing’s narrative potential (Knox 2008).

In this chapter, rather than seeking to essentialise the surfing experience, I will examine how surfing in Tim Winton’s work reveals the sport’s nuanced relationship with the coast to communicate broader notions of natural ‘connectedness’ (Baker 2007: 43). I will argue that this broader treatment of surfing, reflecting an embedded ‘seascape epistemology’ (Ingersoll 2016) allows writers to discuss themes that go far beyond the surfing moment. Drawing on the work of Australian photographer John Witzig whose images similarly explore surfing’s broader implications, I will suggest
that Winton and Witzig help us understand why communicating surfing is important in the first place (Knox 2008).

In order to fully understand Winton’s approach to surf writing however, it is best to examine his work in parallel with a discussion of the significance of landscape and place to his writing, paying special reference to how spatial theory adds meaning to the author’s representation of these notions through surfing.

**Surfing, Landscape and Place**

Winton’s close relationship with the South West Australian coast has been well documented in recent decades, its enduring influence on his writing acknowledged by the author himself. In the opening pages of *Island Home*, Winton remarks that ‘to be an author preoccupied with the landscape is to accept a weird and constant tension between the indoors and the outdoors (2015: 21). Several pages on, after unpacking the implications of this statement to his writing practice, Winton concludes that ‘this country leans in on you. It weighs down hard. Like family. To my way of thinking, it is family’ (2015: 23).

The fictional towns of Sawyer and Angelus that permeate Winton’s fiction are set on this rugged coastline. *Breath* similarly foregrounds these spaces, dissecting the land and coastscape between:
Closer in, the estuary was like a wide, shining gut that was fed by the river as it coiled back and back on itself into the blue-green blur of the forest beyond the town. I’d never viewed the country from this angle before and seen just how shaggy and animal its contours were (2008: 38).

In addition to coastal settings that have helped establish *Breath* as nature writing in its own right, Winton’s treatment of surfing uncovers a far more intricate discussion of the different ways physical space can be communicated and understood. In particular, *Breath*’s representation of surfing could be seen as a variety of landscape and place writing, reflecting the gradual internalisation of the external physical world by Winton and his characters alike. This view would correspond with Satchell’s argument that, ‘lay geographies’ such as surfing ‘are replete with the intricacies and quite specific geographical understandings gleaned from encounters with the surrounding environment, both out of necessity, and the chance and pleasure’ (Satchel 2008:106). Indeed, *Breath*’s early chapters are permeated by frequent moments in which Winton’s protagonist Pikelet describes surfing and the coast in terms indicating the detailed, knowledge-based approach characterised by landscape writing.

From the granite headland whose rocks were daubed with warnings about the dangerous current, the beach stretched east for miles. We watched surfers plunge into a churning rip alongside the rocks and from there they shot toward the break (Winton 2008: 22).

This approach in *Breath* would also suggest an evolution in the way landscape has been perceived. Despite colonial perceptions of the Australian bush as alien, modern
writers such as Winton see an important relationship between this space and our modern identity (Gibson 1992). By challenging the perception of ‘the environment as foreign to human drama’, Winton’s work significantly removes a disconnection between landscape, truth and culture (Carter 1996: 9). Furthermore, his position would couch our identity in terms of evolving attitudes to nature rather than simply an ability to keep it at bay (Watson 2014). Alternatively, this shift could signify a return to more indigenous natural relationships similar to those described by Ingersoll, predicated on an ‘intellectual and embodied literacy of the ‘āina (land) and kai (sea)’ (2016: 06).

In *Breath*, before Pikelet is even able to stand on a surfboard, Winton uses his voice to describe surfing from an outsider’s perspective, positioning surfing as a spectacle and the landscape as something to be studied and understood. ‘There’d be a horrible ball of foam, a snarl of limbs, and a board shooting skyward to flip like a tossed penny above the carnage’ (Winton 2008: 27). This method of description and later accounts of surfing that juxtapose this external position, exemplify differences between the surfer and non-surfer and suggest that representations of natural space may be influenced by the writer’s ability to understand these spaces. Indeed, as Winton admits, ‘the actual physical sensation of sliding down a wall of water, feeling really awake and alive in the moment, is hard to describe to the non-surfer’ (Baker 2007: 40). This difficulty would reinforce the challenge faced by surf writers in communicating the sport to wider audiences while also engaging surfer readers concerned with surfing’s ‘truth’ (Anderson 2014).
While the bush was significant in determining an early Australian identity (Gibson 1992: 64), Australia’s ongoing urbanisation and the subsequent diminishment of forest areas raises the possibility that other environmental spaces now have an equal, if not greater claim for cultural significance (National Portrait Gallery, 2014). These developments would add weight to the idea that Winton’s surf writing in Breath extends to something much larger. ‘Here in Australia, [surfing] helped shape people’s sense of themselves; since the forties, it’s gradually become an identifiable element of our national culture’ (Winton 2016: 131). This belief also corresponds with Robert Drewe’s identification of surfing as an embodiment of coastal experience playing a significant role in how we view ourselves (Drew in Witzig (ed) 2007: 9). Such views of surfing’s significance are also bolstered by Taylor, whose positioning of surfing as a nature religion suggest that there is something more to it than mere pleasure. He notes ‘surfing’s sense of connection and belonging to nature … resemble traditional religions in many ways, including in its myth, ritual, symbols, terminology and technology; a sense that some places, animals and plants are especially sacred’ (2007: 945).

In Breath, this notion of surfing’s broader power is explored through the juxtaposition of Pikelet and his father’s views of the ocean, positioning it as an ideologically contested site. While Pikelet’s father ‘was afraid of the sea’ and possessed a ‘municipal’ relationship with water, Pikelet ‘yearned to swim in the ocean’ (Winton 2008: 19). These differences between father and son and the subsequent tensions they create as Pikelet begins to surf demonstrate landscape’s ability to communicate the nuances of generational difference. Furthermore, they would also suggest the advantage these contrasting perceptions have for narrative storytelling in that space.
and setting can be ideologically contested (Winton 2015: 9). It would seem that
*Breath* is therefore as much about conquering states of mind as it is about taking on
the waves themselves.

This idea of making sense of how nature rubs off on us also permeates Winton’s non-
fiction. In *Island Home*, Winton observes how the communication of landscape
embodies Australia’s difficulty in understanding itself and how these challenges have
translated into artistic forms:

> Australian writers and painters continue to obsess about landscape… We are in
>a place where the material facts of life must still be contended with. There is so
>much more of it than us, we are forever coming to terms. Elsewhere this story is
>largely done and dusted with nature in stumbling retreat, but here our life in
>nature remains an open question and how we answer it will define not just our
culture and politics but our very survival (Winton 2015: 19).

Winton’s views confer a certain responsibility on artists in reasserting landscape’s
position within society as a ‘postmodern, almost post-physical age’ (Winton 2015:
19) threatens to ameliorate our understanding of nature entirely. In this context,
Pikelet’s adventures in *Breath* and his recollection of a childhood spent surfing,
metaphorise the author’s preoccupation with a country forgetting the land. Winton
continues:

> Most of the time we barely register the attrition. In a disembodied era of digital
technology and franchise culture there are periods when even an Australian at
The documentation of landscape in art then becomes a means of bracing against the destruction of natural environments and it is perhaps incumbent on Australian writers and artists to remind their audience that the natural world still exists.

Place and Surfing in Breath

*Breath* suggests a complex and deeply personal relationship with the physical space of the Western Australian coast (Winton 2009):

> The sea was miles away but during big autumn swells a salty vapour drifted up the valley at the height of the treetops, and at night I lay awake as distant waves pummeled the shore. The earth beneath us seemed to hum. I used to get out of bed and lie on the karri floorboards and feel the rumble in my skull (Winton 2008: 9).

So while the term ‘landscape’ would indicate the imbuement of physical space with broader cultural ideas, ‘place’ is inversely more intimate, suggesting physical space’s coalescence with memory, imagination and experience (Lutwack 1984: 29). Highlighting this difference, Winton asserts, ‘these places, the mountains and rivers, headlands and beaches, ate into me, scoring me for life’ (Winton 2015: 52).
If we consider this statement in the context of the surfing act itself, remembering that Winton himself is a surfer, we observe a unique relationship with nature in which distanced observation is superseded by a willingness to be inside the scene (Keach (ed) 1997: 138). Pikelet and Loonie’s con-aesthetic relationship to the ocean (Ford and Brown 2006), their interrogation of the minutiae of nature and desire to be ‘literally inside the wave’ (Stranger 2011), demonstrate a concentrated relationship with physical space where surfing represents a way in (Winton 2015: 50).

Surfing was not just my escape, it was my way into a place that had previously felt as if it were resisting me… It’s easy to imagine surfing as mere sensation, mindless vigour; narcotic, repetitive activity. It’s certainly that. But for me it was never only that. Because for all those hectic moments spent hurtling across the water (or bouncing along the seabed in a welter of sand and foam) there are hours more spent bobbing on the surface. This is when a surfer does little else but watch and wait. The watching and waiting are the bulk of what it means to be out surfing. It’s about observation as much as anticipation (Winton 2015: 50).

Winton’s characterisation of surfing’s significance would then appear to be both in and of the landscape. In addition to alluding to the sport’s cultural importance in shaping how we can look at the world, his writing also symbolises a ‘beautiful connectedness’ with nature (Baker 2007: 40) in which surfing and surf writing is the principal tool. The above passage also indicates Winton’s frustration with a whittling down of surfing to its more immediate aspects, overriding more nuanced elements that would point to surfing’s broader significance in the first place.
The perspectival flux in Breath where surfing and the ocean is described by non-participants such as Pikelet’s father and later articulated in memory by Pikelet himself would also suggest the non-static nature of physical space in surfing, where changes in the writing angle pull the activity in and out of the surfer’s mind.

These distinct spatialities within surfing can be demonstrated hierarchically, in that through landscape, raw physical environments evolve the idea of space to including cultural influences. Beyond this point, and in reflection of the partial internalisation of the external world created through surfing, space would cease to be entirely physical, rather, existing as an imagined and remembered experience. As Winton’s writing in Breath and Island Home both suggest, place is therefore the translation of the physical to the mental, a process through which land and oceanscapes cease to simply be themselves.

While this hierarchy may frame spatial discourse in simplified terms, particularly given that the distinctions between landscape and place in Breath are not always so definite, it does provide a mechanism for understanding how physical environments are evolved through surfing. In the context of this study’s earlier discussion of the surfing sublime and the role of memory in surfing, it would also reassert the idea of the sport’s ability to create a unique ‘connectedness’ with the natural world (Geall 2015), an idea consistently explored by Winton even in his non-fiction writing:

Surfing is done at the mercy of the elements and requires an intimacy with them beyond the ken of a golfer or a tennis player. To surf, a person foregoes
timetables and submits to the vagaries of nature… To me surfing has always been a matter of beauty and connectedness (Winton 2016: 134).

For Winton, it would then seem that surfing’s main benefit is not its elicitation of ecstatic experience. Rather, in keeping with Ingersoll’s notion of an ‘seascape epistemology’, it is its encouragement of an indigenous relationship with the world underscored by a sense of embedment within it (Winton 2015). Ingersoll’s notes, ‘seascape epistemology is not a knowledge of the sea. Instead, it is a knowledge about the ocean and the wind as an interconnected system that allows for successful navigation through them’ (2016: 06).

This possibility of a distinctly indigenous relationship however, is challenged by McGloin, who critiques Winton for erasing indigenous people from the landscape in *Breath*, seeing the work as perpetuating a stereotypical, nationalist narrative (2012). McGloin asserts, ‘the absence of indigenous representation in this work not only leaves colonial relations of power in place, neither questioning nor disturbing the complexities that discursively produce white masculinities, but also reproduces those power relations’ (2012: 119).

Whether Winton is guilty of omitting indigenous Australia from *Breath* or not, this question of representation and a tendency for writers to internalise the physical world through place could explain how physical space is used to preserve a writer’s own personal memory or existence, demonstrating the strong connection between place

Given Winton’s persistent use of South Western Australia as the setting of his narratives, and irrespective of McGloin’s claims, it is possible then that *Breath* is as much an attempt to preserve an image the writer has of himself as it is an exploration of surfing and space. Winton states, ‘.... the surge of feeling that overtakes me isn’t nostalgia so much as recognition, a kind of sensory memory that has never diminished. No matter how long I have been away…’ (Winton 2015: 52). So in addition to reminding a country of its need to recognise and integrate nature into its life, Winton’s writing uses place as kind of existential depository in which he can protect a past that may be under threat.

**The Surfing Imagination**

In order to understand the complex spatial dynamics espoused in *Breath*, it is important to consider how Winton’s writing conveys surfing’s capacity to build entirely new spaces in the imagination of its practitioners. This fixation on what lies beyond the moment of surfing is also demonstrated by reflections of surfing’s significance to Winton personally:

> The activity influenced our conceptual framework in ways that aren’t always credited… Waiting and flowing were anachronistic notions, they’d nearly
become foreign concepts, but to me they were part of an imaginative lexicon feeding something in me that had to do with more than surfing (Winton 2016: 132).

As earlier chapters of this study and Winton’s above statement indicate, the surfing experience can be partially characterised by a desire for conditions that are often not there. The ecstasy of surfing good waves, contrasted with the fact that these conditions frequently fail to eventuate, leaves surfers in a position where situations must be imagined. This reality is explained by the common term ‘mind-surfing’ in which ‘pleasure can be derived from indulging the imagination’ (Bennet 2016) and would suggest that surfing worlds are as fantastical as they are real.

This imaginative position is compounded by the fact that the ocean is never the same, as unique conditions are created every day (Winton 2016: 55). It exemplifies the living nature of place in surf writing, where real and imagined spaces coalesce. These ideas also correspond to Edward Soja’s notion of thirdsplace in which ‘the separation of physical from mental space is set aside’ and these ‘spaces are brought together... representing a link between physical, geographical spaces and mental, cultural constructions of space’ (Winkler 2012: 253). This notion of the centrality of imagination to place making and the idea that space can be simultaneously physical and non-physical however, is perhaps best communicated via Foucault’s analogy of the ship as a quintessential heterotopic space. He notes,

Think of the ship: it is a floating part of space, a placeless place, that lives by itself, closed in on itself and at the same time poised in the infinite ocean… Then you will understand why it has been not only and obviously, the main
means of economic growth (which I do not intend to go into here), but at the
same time the greatest reserve of imagination for our civilization from the
sixteenth century down to the present day. The ship is the heterotopia par
excellence. In civilizations where it is lacking, dreams dry up, adventure is
replaced by espionage, and privateers by the police (1984: 27).

Given the many similarities between boating and surfing, these ideas, anchored in a
belief that heterotopic spaces create their own imaginary order would go some way to
demonstrating the strange power that surfing has over its practitioners (Foucault 1984:
25).

These heterotopian possibilities of non-physical space are also evident in Breath. As
Loonie, Pikelet and Sando prepare to take on Old Smokey, we see Winton
experimenting with imagined place-thinking. We get the sense that these surf
passages are unpacking the importance of the Western Australian coast,
demonstrating its weighty effects on the writer’s and characters’ minds.

I tried to imagine them, these radiating shocks, as they rolled toward us like
harbingers of a trouble we couldn’t yet see. Along with Loonie I was excited and
jittery, though there was still something unreal about the rigmarole of preparation
when the storms themselves seemed so abstract (Winton 2008: 84).

This imagining of the ocean’s future state would then see place as ‘a constellation of
ongoing trajectories’ (Massey 2005: 92) with various human and geographic
components contributing to the continuing ‘story’ of this constellation (Anderson
2012: 574). For Anderson, place is also both moment and location and significantly, these conditions in surfing meet and move together (2012: 576).

In *Breath*, the surfing experience and coastscape are perhaps better characterised by their existence in the minds of Winton’s characters than in the physical world. Loonie and Pikelet’s, desperation to describe their experiences in an attempt to relive them would also suggest this possibility, reminding us of the prickly relationship between embodied and communicated experience in surfing (Ford and Brown 2006).

It was hard to find the words for the things we’d just seen and done. The events themselves resonated in our limbs. You felt shot full and the sensation burned for hours – for days, some times – yet you couldn’t make it real for anybody else. You couldn’t and you weren’t sure you wanted to. But we blathered at each other from the sheer excitement and you can imagine the boyish superlatives and the jargon we employed (Winton 2008: 128).

It is here within this wash of space and time that Winton’s writing embodies the notion that surf writing can capture how raw environments are internalised and later projected. This perspective is in line with the Kantian notion of sublimity, similarly asserting nature’s significance in terms of its lingering effect on the mind (Knox 2008).

Beyond the imaginations of his characters, however, Winton’s writing practice provides further insight into the coalescent relationship between the real and fantastical. Winton confesses, ‘I can’t even hang a painting in my workroom, for what else is a painting but a window? My thoughts are drawn outward, I’m entranced … so
a lot of the time I write in a blank cubicle, my back to the view’ (Winton 2015: 21). Winton’s absolute rejection of stimuli simultaneously reflects a boyish restlessness (Winton 2015: 21) and demonstrates a confidence in reimagining the physical world, indicating that places are in fact embedded within the writer’s conscience.

The Surfing Past

Perhaps more powerful than the imaginative or fantastical capacities of Winton’s characters in *Breath* that exemplify the influence of desire on surfing space (Stranger 2011: 169) is Winton’s tendency for retrospection. Both its plot and characters’ retelling of experience display a flirtation with conventional temporal boundaries. The retrospective framing device in *Breath*, established at the outset and returned to in the final pages of the book, indicates a tendency toward historicisation among surfers (Knox 2008) and reminds us of the ‘entanglement of associations and attachments, accumulated in the ambiguity of lived experiences’ that is the surfing memory (Satchell 2008: 98). For Knox, Winton’s choice to speak in the past tense ‘gives the surf sequences the sepia tint that brings them alive’ (2008).

Thus, while Pikelet and Loonie frequently burst out in hyperbolic, present tense rants expressing surfing’s sublimity, these moments are couched within a narrative framework that grounds surfers’ tendencies for fantasy, mythologisation and exaggeration (Diehm and Armatas 2004: 675). This shifting framework may also allude to Winton’s views that the wonder of natural experience is diminished as time and age dull our senses (Baker 2007: 39). So while Breath’s younger characters
capture the beauty and excitement of their lived experiences, Winton’s older narrator computes these descriptions, positioning them within a longer, wider story. Winton’s surf writing is then almost a dual exploration of the moment and its lingering effects, a juggling of insider and outsider.

Indeed, the narrator of Breath, an older Pikelet, recalls early surfing experiences from memory. Characters and settings are, in a sense, products of Winton’s memory itself, part of an experience in which waves, beaches and the ocean cease to be geographical entities (Gretlund 1994: 347). This view is supported by Thacker, who characterises ‘place’ in literature as a type of imaginative exploration (Thacker 2003: 14). Within this context, surfing assumes a wider symbolic value, indicating an identity beyond that imposed by family, town and country (Winton 2008: 191). Winton’s surf narrative, we realise, is not a surfing story at all but a story of belonging, ‘a lived cartography of the coast’ (Satchel 2008: 101).

Before extending the discussion of Breath’s treatment of ‘place’, we must remind ourselves of what constitutes surf writing and where its boundaries lie. While Breath has been lauded as a seminal piece in the growing lexicon of surf fiction (Edemariam 2008), it fosters an approach that encourages us to reconsider the wider possibilities of the form against claims that surf writing is doomed to fail (Joyce 2011).

**Surfing’s Broader Experience**
Where a great mass of the material we digest in surfing publications focuses prescriptively on the surfing moment (Joyce 2011), Winton’s writing digs in and around this experience, reflecting a vision of surfing that locates the wave itself in the periphery. Large swathes of text within Breath exemplify a world of surfing without needing to describe the act itself (Winton 2008: 140). In fact, the sport is often characterised by its absence in the lives of Loonie and Pike whose escapades during those flat days teach us more about what surfing is than any description of a person on a wave (Winton, 2008: 174). Therefore, while Breath illustrates the way that surfing itself can be stretched out in the mind, we are also privy to a treatment of surfing that positions it within its wider physical context. In Breath, surfing is part of a larger nervous system resembling the painter John Olsen’s perspective of landscapes as a tapestry of interdependent relationships (Winton 2015: 62). Significantly, this idea would extend to both Winston’s treatment of surfing’s position in the world of nature and to his re-contextualisation of the act as part of a bigger community experience.

Interestingly, this treatment of surfing is not unique to Breath or to surf writing. The photography of Tracks surf magazine founder John Witzig also positions the sport within a wider structure. In apparent appropriation of Naughton and Peterson’s ‘Centro America’, campfire scenes, desolate beachscapes and images of half-dressed youths in car parks dominate Witzig’s frame, exemplifying a curiosity in the life around surfing (Witzig (ed) 2007:11).

Upon viewing Witzig’s images and in the absence of a starting whistle or lines demarcating a playing territory, we are encouraged to consider that surfing is ongoing. While the ideas of memory and imagination situate surfing beyond the
moment, we also see how surfing’s ritualism and communitas (Stranger 2007) further expand its spatial parameters. Importantly, Witzig’s photography forces us to question when surfing starts, and how long after our wetsuits are dry that it finishes.

In much of Witzig’s photography, there is also a sense that waves represent more of an afterthought and that it is perhaps the time before and after each wave that is more significant to storytelling (Cherry in Witzig 2007: 12). While Witzig’s photographic perspective may indicate a democratisation of surfing narratives by expanding the scene, he really is arguing for a shift in how the sport is told. Witzig himself notes, ‘There’s no surf in a lot of the photographs of mine... standing on the beach with a big lens – it’s a really boring thing to do... you needed to paint a wider picture’ (Maher 2014). Above all else, it is perhaps the social interactions that surfing creates that are most significant. Witzig’s photography therefore arguably reflects surfing’s value in
documenting social relations, providing another reason as to why surf representation is useful or necessary. Much like Winton, Witzig’s art uses surfing as a positional tool, a framework for speaking about the world.

![McGettigan's Cafe (Witzig, 2007: 19)](image)

Witzig’s photographs of Western Victoria in the 60s and 70s reinforce this particular notion of a surfing life, exemplified by his 1963 photograph McGettigan’s Café where seven shirtless young men are draped against the wall of a local tuckshop (Witzig 2007). No ocean is evident within the frame, and the photograph is devoid of surfing paraphernalia. There are no surfboards, no cars stacked with boards and no wetsuits or board shorts hangings from fences. In fact, the scene, in its seeming dislocation from anything overtly symbolic of surfing, teeters on the brink of sterility, suggesting a story entirely unrelated to the coast. Still, it is here that Cherry’s notion of the minutia in Witzig’s work manifests itself. Witzig’s subjects are ‘not items of nostalgic fetish, but forensic traces of lives that revolved around surfing and were active in creating it’
(Cherry in Witzig 2007: 9). The young men’s exhausted expressions, the presence of food and their messy hair all allude to an event that preceded this moment. Surfing in Witzig’s photographs is thus retroactively inferred. Only by locating granular clues in Witzig’s photographs within our understanding of what surf trips involve can we establish their meaning. For Mark Cherry, this reliance on the viewer’s ability to remember is also an ‘integral part of the Witzig signature and one that defines his work as art’ (Cherry in Witzig 2007: 12).

Much like Winton, Witzig’s surf photography potently celebrates the world behind the wave. As an immediate medium, perhaps better equipped than writing to capture the fleetingness of the surfing moment, it is significant that Witzig still chooses to look more broadly at the sport. It is as if by making this choice, Witzig’s photos warn us of the dangers of a reductive perspective - that without considering the broader context, surfing is rendered meaningless. Additionally, it would suggest that Witzig’s work symbolises an erosion of the boundaries separating the surfing act and pursuit of that act (Warshaw 2010: 298). Surfing therefore exists through time, suggesting also the non-specificity of landscape in which the sport can exist in a multitude of locations that are then stitched together by the artist.

Despite a difference in medium, the obvious similarities in Witzig’s and Winton’s approach encourage us to reconsider representations of surfing. While wave riding undoubtedly signifies the high point of a surfer’s life, to focus exclusively on this moment would mean forfeiting any understanding of surfing’s significance beyond its ability to elicit feelings of ecstasy (Stranger 2011: 180). Furthermore, stereotypical conceptions of the surfing experience also obscure the importance of art in unpacking
deeper connections to the natural world. For Winton, whilst writing about surfing has allowed him to reclaim and relive the ecstatic feelings that a childhood by the sea created, surfing’s real value lies in its ritualistic connection with nature (Baker 2007). Surfing is a frame through which we can protect our relationship with the natural world, and it is from this position that Winton’s surfing ‘place’ emerges.

Corroborating this need for a more heterogeneous approach to surf writing, the writer himself declares,

> Surfers need to broaden I think to see the bigger picture… I think men and women who are passionate about surfing can bring something grown up to the wider culture. I’m talking about wisdom here, not market share (Baker 2007: 44).

It is thus not the surfing moment but the way that it colours life and makes us see the world differently that is significant. Winton asserts,

> It takes humility and patience to see what truly lies before us. A different kind of seeing comes, Hopper says, to those who ‘stay longer and look with open hearts and minds.’ We need not to search merely in order to capture. Our fresh gaze yearns to understand, to bring knowledge inward – not just catalogue it, but to celebrate what we encounter, to nurture and protect it (Winton 2015: 122).

Therefore, while surfing is exciting and the moment of being on the wave inimical, surf writing is most important for its ability to communicate broader notions of natural ‘connectedness’. Surfing’s fusion of the physical and the imaginative,
epitomising a deeper relationship with our surroundings, further foregrounds the significance of surf writing.
Strange as it might seem, the life of a novelist is often like that of a surfer. I come to the desk every day and mostly I wait. I sit for hours, bobbing in a sea of memories, impressions and historical events... That’s how I experience writing, which is its own compulsion. I show up. I wait. When some surge of energy finally arrives, I do what I must to match its speed. While I can, I ride its force. For a brief period I’m caught up in something special, where time has no purchase, and my bones don’t ache and my worries fall away. Then it’s all flow. And I’m dancing (Winton 2016: 135).

The task of articulating surfing is a difficult one, exacerbated by surfing’s explosive growth in popularity in the 20th century that subsequently ignited debate around its true definition. Surfing has undergone many stages of transition, highlighted by technological developments in surf craft and the emergence of a lucrative surfing industry. The storytelling around it has similarly evolved as writers, photographers and artists have all grappled with the surfing experience. Furthermore, disparate expressions of the nature of the surfing experience both demonstrate the sport’s ongoing cultural evolution (Moser 2008) and highlight the possibility that surfing itself is a particularly difficult thing to record. As the above statement by Winton suggests, surf writing, much like the sport itself, is an unsure, fleeting and doubtful
business, giving rise to the question of why writers even bother in the first place (Warshaw 2010: 220).

With this question in mind and in response to the myriad attempts to essentialise surfing’s true experience across time, this thesis has sought to uncover the significance of representations of surfing. In recognition of the scale of surf culture and the many ways it has been artistically explored in the past, this study has focused specifically on the work of Tim Winton in *Breath* and *Island Home*.

Despite assertions that surf literature is doomed to fail or writing on the subject is inherently pointless (Joyce 2011), this thesis has argued that surf writing’s greatest value lies in its ability to unpack the complexities of human relationships with the natural world. While surf writing is inherently complex, and surfing itself reflects a confluence of many social and natural elements that complicate its essentialisation, surf writing remains important for allowing writers to study the world differently. Moreover, surfing’s highly engaged relationship with its surroundings and the fact that most surf writers are practitioners of the sport make this pursuit worthwhile (Stranger 1999). Significantly, the gradual internalisation of the physical landscape that surfing encourages establishes surf writing as a variety of place literature in which the weight of singular surfing moments is overshadowed by broader occurrences of natural connectedness.

In establishing surf writing as a form of place writing, this study has examined a number of themes within surf narratives to demonstrate the inherent limitations of communicating the sport too narrowly. These areas, while also illustrating the
incongruous perceptions that exist around surfing’s significance, also support an argument for how conceiving of surf writing in terms of place thinking may be beneficial.

Firstly, the notion of the romantic sublime, underscored by ‘an ineffable experience of the infinite in the contemplation of terror and beauty in nature’ (Stranger 2011: 163), has significantly influenced how the surfing moment has been understood and conveyed. However, while underpinning the intense natural relationships that a surfing life creates, romantic notions of sublimity have in part failed to account for the totality of the surfing experience underscored by its de-differentiation between experience and appreciation and a subsequent de-realisation of fear (Stranger 2011: 178). These differences between a romantic sublime, exemplified by observation and what Lash describes as a postmodern surfing sublime (Lash 1991: 175), point to how more realistic expositions of the surfing experience may depend on the recording of surfing from both outside and within its experience. As Winton’s Breath demonstrates, surf-centric ways of viewing sublimity, in which the fear of nature is mediated by a better understanding of it (Ford and Brown 2006: 17), offer far more compelling ways of viewing and (re)telling the surfing experience. In the context of Winton, this idea of a unique ‘surfer’s gaze’ therefore functions as a tool with which the writer may etch deeper into the surfing world he records.

In addition to the pervasive influence the sublime has had on surf storytelling, other ideas have equally helped shape the way surfing has been communicated and understood. In particular, the recurring notions of perfection and travel within surf storytelling have contributed to a simplified aesthetisation of surfing and subsequent
diminishment of its full experience and scope (Stranger 2011: 158). These distortions of surfing’s real truth, exemplified by surfing brands’ presentation of surfing in artless and aspirational terms, have had negative implications on how surfing has been understood in broader culture. Even if these tropes have arguably undermined our ability to conceive of surfing outside a surfing industry, they remain significant to surf writers in how, when unpacked further, they encourage a reconsideration of the relationship between surfing and space. In fact, when explored alongside the spatial thinking of Foucault and Soja, these selfsame ideas promote a stretching out of the surfing moment, a process in which our anticipation and imagination of the surf experience problematise the distinction between it and physical space. This possibility that ‘surfing could symbolize something much larger than the act itself’ (Capp 2005: 203) is reaffirmed by Winton’s writing, especially in Breath where a fluidity between real and imagined places muddy stereotypical notions of surf travel and perfection and emphasise surf writing’s value as a writing position and a way of viewing the world.

Rather than depending on international travel and virgin waves, surfing may therefore be best communicated through seemingly mundane surfing expeditions and by examining surfers’ expectations of the surf experience outside of the moment itself.

Having asserted how stereotypes of travel and perfection have contributed to surf writing’s position as a place writing form and extended the idea of surfing’s amelioration of spatial boundaries, this study then examined the role of memory and language in surfing communication. In particular, it argued that the fleeting nature of waves and reality of the sea’s perpetual movement require a dissolution of linear time
in storytelling to accommodate the ongoing difference of water. From this perspective, surf narratives stitch together discordant experiences to create an impression of surfing as a whole, rather than reporting specific moments in time.

This tension in seeking to capture what surfing is would then imply that surf writers must consider a different way of framing the surf experience as well as the significance of writing about the sport outside the slipperiness of the wave itself (Knox 2008). As parts of Breath demonstrate, the answer to this question lies in the exploration of surfing’s more peripheral elements. This process, despite the allure of capturing and making sense of the surfing moment, involves zooming out to consider surfing’s wider implications. In stepping beyond the reification of single moments, surf writing can then convey much more than the ecstatic experience of standing on water. This approach reaffirms surf writing’s value beyond its stereotypical tropes and aestheticisation and reasserts it as a platform or way of interrogating the world.

After examining the fraught relationship between surfing, language and memory and having highlighted the limitations that a paradoxical obsession with recording an experience we cannot remember create (Anderson 2012), this study turned to a deeper analysis of Winton’s Breath and Island Home in the context of place. While the sublime, surfing stereotypes and how surfing has been articulated through language indicate a need for a wider writing aperture on the sport, it is the synthesis of the spatial notions of landscape and place and surfing’s ability to fuse physical and non-physical elements that make writing about the act significant.
As Winton’s work indicates, surf writing is symbolic of a personal connection with landscape in which the boundaries of time and space are blurred (Thacker 2003: 20). And while the story of Pikelet and Loonie and their crazy adventures exemplify how surfing lets us into the world, it is Winton’s writing practice itself and his perspective of the significance of the South Western Australian coast to his own life that provide the best answers to why surf writing is important at all.

Ultimately, while being on the wave is certainly the most exhilarating part of any surfers’ life (Winton 2016: 131), the significance of surfing to authors extends far beyond this fleeting, anxious and impossible moment. In answering the question of why we bother, it is surfing’s fusion of the physical, metaphysical and fantastical and its ability to position us deeply and more actively within the world around us that make this pursuit worthwhile.
Part Two
Three Pines is a novella set on a bed and breakfast property on the New South Wales Coast. Told from the perspective of an adolescent boy learning to surf it is a story about landscape, family relationships and the meaning of place. Based in the daily life of the bed and breakfast property, the story weaves surfing into the texture of the narrative demonstrating the ongoing imaginative power of the surf experience.

As the boy grows older, and the property itself undergoes significant change, his concept of identity and the importance of surfing change significantly. It is only with the final sale of the bed and breakfast that he comes to appreciate the significance of surfing, remembering not the waves themselves but the broader relationship with place they created.

Woven together with the boy’s evolving experience is the story of his mother. Told in a series of diary entries over time, this narrative focuses on the boy’s parents, examining the fragility of their relationship and the difficulty of etching a life out on the coast.
Toward the end of the novel these narratives coalesce and it is here that the significance of surfing, the importance of the landscape and the true implications of selling a property after so long are fully understood.
Three Pines
Chapter One

I am running now. Running fast. I am crouched low like a hunter. The leaves and dry, thin branches of the eucalypts scratch me as I pass. I know that from the top of the hill, the part where the verandah peeps out over the valley, you can’t be seen if you are hunched over. If you keep quiet and press your body low into your legs and run you will not be seen. You will crawl through the green, over the feathers and the sticks and arrive secretly. These are things I know.

The vacuum cleaner tumbles over behind me, gasping out a cloud of old, forgotten dust, bobby pins and cigarette butts. I stop and put the head back onto the body, wrapping the enormous hospitality-grade power lead back around the base. There is no ‘coil’ button to press. It is a factory machine and you must wrap the lead. The machine itself is bright orange with wheels that swivel. It has one button; ON. And with a huge and undying suction it grazes, pulling dead moths and spilt sugar out of the carpet.

If they are driving at twenty kilometres an hour, I have five minutes to vacuum. Five minutes to drag this machine through the bushes, over Jack’s grave where I sometimes hit golf balls at the vast, unreachable sea. Five minutes to plug it in, vacuum, unplug it and then look on my hands and knees for pubic hair and be gone. I
am a flash. I am a splitting atom, the machine is bright and furious and quick, its black hose kinking and wrapping around the furniture like a snake.

They have obviously rung from the school. Down the road, three kilometres away, there is a public telephone. It and the school beside are the only suggestions that Tanja may in fact be a town and not one of those other places.

I kick the door open. Mum is already there, throwing sheets across the bed. I stop and watch one float like a cloud, blanking out the room in front of me and erasing, just for a moment, the paintings, cabinets and two teacups we place for our guests with the sugar sticks and flowers Mum cuts from the garden. The sheet rises into the air, pauses over everything and begins its slow descent. Giving back the room. Mum’s painting reappears. The mud brick wall behind it. My grandparents’ dresser. The sheet settles in long white ripples and bits of flat. It is a landscape of perfect white that tomorrow, for ten dollars, I’ll collect, rolling everything into a ball and stuffing it into one of our blue laundry bags.

‘Where is your brother!?’

Mum doesn’t look at me. She is hospital tucking the folds on the corner of the bed. Getting that perfect vertical line that means your bed has been made by a professional and you will wake at some point in the night feeling trapped; pinned to the mattress.

‘The kitchen.’

There is a pause as she strains to lift the mattress.

‘Good.’
Of course, every guest is different. Every time I go to the cottages with my cleaning bag hitched to my back, there is something new to be discovered. It is a crime scene and I am the detective. First you walk in lightly, just looking at things, trying to see or feel any change. You admire the positioning of objects - the stacks, the patches of empty bench. You look for the space. The dark slits of shadow where something has been stuffed or fallen on its own. Under the bed or behind the fridge – these are places you go.

It is my brother’s fault I am here, walking with towels around my feet in the bathroom. He failed to put the reservation in the book and now it is battle stations. All of us running and scrubbing. When I left, Damon was in the kitchen, shackled by guilt to the bench. I could hear the drilling of water into the sink and the tumble of potatoes onto the bench. The guests are three from Sydney so it will only be five or six potatoes tonight. Then garlic, chillies from near the other cottage, salting the eggplants. All of it set out in neat pyramids for Dad; every pile an apology. And then of course it is the dishes, shimmering white and stacked according to size.

I hear the sound of the Falcon up the driveway and after several minutes, see its red shape on the road below, a long plume of dust following behind. Our neighbours complain that the added traffic makes corrugations and all the dust dirties the clothes on their line. At least, that’s what the council letters say before they’re thrown in the bowl with the corks and the bills from ANZ.

Dad’s Falcon is a fair way down now and the dust has thinned, returning the huge green of the paddocks. At the end of the straight, another car appears and for a
moment it looks like a game of chicken. Our red, hail-specked Falcon and a white car
creeping along. But they don’t collide and with a final spray of dust, Dad is around
the corner and the white car is left alone, inching forward.

Mum is standing beside me now, the bed made. Big Orange has done the room and
the towels are folded in a quaint heap on the corner of the mattress. Mum squiggles a
quick card and places a bottle of champagne in the fridge, turning the label in to face
the door. We are done.

Some people that stay leave nothing. Apart from the money they pat into Dad’s hand.
It’s as if they were never there. You forget them instantly. Their bed is made and the
cups are washed or entirely unused, sitting politely next to each other on the bench.
Not one pubic hair in the shower. The towels are dry.

There have been many like that, people whose money and messages in our book are
the only clues they ever existed. We dance around them like monkeys on strings,
delivering tea and chilled wine. Dad cooks for them and they sit on our deck with the
Rosellas and Wattlebirds in battle around them. I see them walking around our
garden, picking out the colours. Or standing by as Dad explains how you cast a
pilchard. We suggest vineyards, beaches, walks, parks and fishing spots. Mum talks
of other artists they may like to see. They can buy cheese, oysters, jams, chutneys -
they can buy anything. All local, all handmade. There is a man that sells bags of goat
shit that are good for the garden. Another man sells flowers. Everything is for sale.
Anything they want they can have. And when they leave, we all stand together at the
doors and watch the car disappear. We smile and wave, waiting for that heavy curtain
to fall. Dad puts the money in the cupboard and strolls outside for a cigarette, itching his balls. Mum sits beside him rearranging the scarf around her head and we are a family again.

Mum doesn’t acknowledge my brother when we get back to the house. He is still at the bench. I see a pile of browning garlic by his side and our giant dinner plates drying by the sink. It is a good measure of our mistakes – if the dirty dishes have simply been reorganised and the bench wiped, it usually means a guest has had to come trotting down the path because there was no toilet paper. But for the kitchen to look like this, white with perfect wood and the rats nowhere in sight, it means a big thing. A thing like leaving a booking out of the book and having them ring us from the payphone right when Dad was listening to Joe Cocker on full blast and Mum was reading on the deck.

Of course, it could be worse. It can always be worse. When the bread and butter pudding caves in. When a guest is showing early signs of food poisoning and can be heard from their cottage howling in the night. When there is no gas. When a rat scampers across the dining room floor.

I give Damo my best look of sympathy before running upstairs to watch Mum get ready for the guests. There is a tree branch at the entrance of the room that Dad and I got for Mum to hang her earrings and necklaces from. It is painted white and sits in a vase with rocks in the bottom to keep it straight.
Mum has selected a scarf already and it is arranged in a casual knot around her head. I pick up a set of earrings I think will match and pass them to her. For a second she looks at them before giving them back and choosing the ones she always wears. Turquoise green. The size of your fists.
Chapter Two

‘And who was sitting next to who?’

Mum speaks but does not take her eyes from her sketchbook. She is burying dark lead into the patch of paper that will become my brother’s hair. Damon gapes at the TV, unaware he is being drawn.

‘It would appear there’s been a rearrangement.’

Mum pauses for a second, taking in Dad’s words. She raises her glass and he sloshes wine into it, a few drops landing among her pencils. For a moment I see the half image of my brother sitting on her lap. His mouth hangs open and his eyes are large and dim. She has exaggerated the shadows in the folds of the doona tucked up around his neck and it looks like he is lying under scrunched paper or jagged, folded tin.

Dad collects our plates, spins and disappears back down the stairs.

‘Is there dessert?’

Like Mum, Damon’s eyes don’t move when he speaks. He is ‘in the zone’, watching Peter Kenzy edge across another perfect wave. They are surfing in Indonesia because in between the clips of waves there are close-ups of wrinkled locals holding baskets of fish and shots of dirt roads through palm trees. Damon stares blankly, absorbing everything.
‘Your father made boysenberry ice cream and you boys will take your bowls down and clean them after you eat it.’

We both nod.

Damo’s head has been filled in with the dark lead now and a painting on the wall has begun to take form. Mum often uses her own paintings as subjects. A thing I find odd and curious and that reminds me of those Russian dolls or the circus rooms where your reflection appears again and again until there is a line of you all moving at the same time.

There is one painting we have of two fish with a picture in the background where the fish are also in the picture, and it keeps going back and back and back with everything constantly getting smaller until you realise that it is just the same thing being repeated like a fraction. I don’t know what it means but something about it makes me think of déjà vu and how some things just never go away.

‘So are they all sleeping together in the same bed?’

Damon looks over to me with a gush of excitement and then to Mum.

‘...Naked?’

He snickers and something wells up between us.

Mum doesn’t look up but there are creases in her face and I know she wants to laugh.

‘...There’d always be someone left out.’

‘Well why don’t you go down and join them tonight darling and find out?’

Embarrassed, Damon pulls the doona back under his chin and stares back at the television. I imagine him in bed with the three lesbians, kissing them one by one and
smoking cigarettes that leave thin trails of smoke going up to the roof. On the TV, a swell looms up behind a surfer before crashing into a mess of sand and white. Jagged punk music plays in the background.

This is the first time we’ve had lesbians as guests. They’ve been in the Seaview cottage for two days with their white city car parked out the front. They are all different heights and two look like sisters with brown hair that hangs in loops over their eyes. Last night, after Dad collected their dinner and Damon was scrubbing empty plates in the sink, I watched them going back down the path to their cottage. They all held hands and it was like an Olympics with the tallest one of them standing in the middle. They swung their arms and every now and then stopped to look at the sculptures in our garden. All the trees were still and the valley was blotted out with a thick line of fog. The ocean was still, no sound of surf, not even the whiplash crack of shore breaks hitting the sand.

On quiet nights like this I can hear the guests. It is like a zoo where the wind brings the sound of animals across from the other cages. I hear words, giggles, the punk-rock sound of divorce. But tonight there was nothing. Not a single word or giddy cry of pleasure.

Damon’s face is fully shaded in now and the painting behind him looks just like it does in real life, with big, over-the-top leaves and green water in a vase. The doona is still up around his neck and his ice cream bowl lies next to him on the carpet. Mum hasn’t told us to clean up yet, and every second that passes with her pencil scraping on the page we are preparing ourselves for the trip downstairs. Dad will often take our
plates for us, but on nights like this with the banging in the kitchen and the dishwasher on constant we’ll have to go down ourselves. Wiped noses, clothes on, our saltwater hair neatly patted down – Damon leading, the whole time.

Damon does more talking to the guests than I do. If they catch us in the garden playing cricket or walk past while we are unloading our boards from the Falcon, I can run off and hide in the wattle trees, but Damon must stay. He greets them and tells them stories. They stand beside him, leaning against our car as he does the list of national parks or tells the story of the abalone diver that got eaten by a shark. One man even helps him with the boards and wetsuits.

‘Must be so cold?’
The man says, his linen shirt roughly folded above his elbows.

None of it is real of course and everything we say falls somewhere between the surf movies we watch and things that actually happen. Our life is a movie that guests watch underwater where everything is big and more exaggerated. They hover around us commenting on what we do in long winding sentences that make it all sound so good. In the paddocks they see the black specks of cows and hills that roll while we count tussocks and watch the fireweed stain each hill like a smoker’s finger. We are a product, a shop where every rustic piece of country life is up for grabs. And while we are free to surf and make bonfires that light the entire valley there is always that price tag hanging: $150 double, $100 single.

I can hear more talking downstairs now. It is nothing loud or aggressive, just the patter of different voices in a room. Dad’s footsteps into the dining hall are heavy. He
has giant feet and the giant frame of a swimmer, but his footsteps are loud because our house sits on poles and there is a gap between the floor and the ground. I’m the only one that can fit in the gap and when Damon is angry or catches me in his ‘study’ folder on the computer, it is the best place to hide. It is also where I found Jack last year, with his tongue drooped on the ground letting lines of ants into his head.

Dad’s steps echo to us as he approaches the guests. There is a flutter of muffled sounds, which means one or all of the lesbians are speaking to him. They are probably talking about the ice cream he has served or saying ‘yes’ and ‘ah’, to the preserved fruit that Dad mixes with canned stuff we get in town from the IGA.

Dad is in full swing tonight. He’s putting on the whole show. The booking debacle has added an extra layer to his performance. From my chair, I peer back over the dividing wall to see him prancing back in toward the guests, a bottle of wine in his hand. My blue CD player is plugged in at the kitchen, launching huge walls of Pavarotti toward the lesbians. Dad sings a line from the CD in a forced Italian accent, stopping abruptly to pour their wine.

There is a string of ‘thank yous’ and Dad is back around the corner, running toward the kitchen with his huge back hunched over and a tea towel scrunched up in his hand.

It is the home straight now. The final act before the house breaks into ‘goodbyes’ and more ‘thank yous’. Above the music we hear a muffled ‘fuck’. There is a crash in the sink and straight away Damon looks over to me. Mum stops drawing, putting her pen down flat. For a moment, we are all alert, our heads pointed slightly upward. Mum is
closest to the stairs and she will go first if necessary. If it is really bad, Damon will be
gently called down too.

‘Fucking, fuck.’
The swearing is not loud and the guests can’t hear him with Pavarotti nailing it from
my CD player, but something has definitely happened.

‘It’s the pie.’ Damon glances over to Mum, before leaning back into the stack of
single bed mattresses she has decorated with pillows to make into a couch.

‘Definitely the pie.’

I nod. Pies are Dad’s latest thing. Like veal *saltimbocca* and the wood fired *calzones*,
they are his new menu item. He uses a cookbook Mum got from the op shop. The lady
on the front has frizzy 1980s hair and every pie is tall and perfect with slices of
tomato around the sides and parsley on top. But dad’s pies are different – low and
wobbly, with liquid that drizzles out along the plate.

There is almost silence, nothing but the dishwasher groaning and the chatter of the
lesbians. I look over the wall and see Dad with his arms and head down on the kitchen
bench. There are shards of pastry on the floor and caster sugar, like snow. I want to go
down and help but he will yell and then Mum will be there too and the guests will
turn and see us fighting.

‘Okay.’

I hear the fake calm in Dad’s voice and turn back to the TV wishing we could still be
in yesterday with the air washing through the house and Cocker’s voice pelting out.

Back on the screen, bars of swell bend in, snagging on bits of reef. The waves launch
upward and out at the same time, eating the rock. It is scary and beautiful, and in slow
motion I can see the direction of the wind in the water, the shape of the tide, the coral below. Mum has finished Damon’s portrait and he is allowed to move again. He throws the doona off his body in a gasp and spreads his legs, getting air to his balls. ‘Your turn.’

I move my arm to my side and Mum nods, approving the position. There will be no pissing now, no wrestling the remote or extra ice cream until that abrupt ripping sound of her pulling out the page interrupts our video.

There is the snap of the microwave door and then Dad’s footsteps going back in toward the room. Mum stops to drink her wine and back over the wall I see that the pastry on the bench is gone and the caster sugar has been swept into a small brown clump.

The lesbians have finished their dessert and coffee and one by one they come walking through the main section of our house. Damon pauses the surf movie and on my stomach I crawl to the top lip of our staircase to watch them assembling around our fire.

‘Stop it.’ Mum tries but it is obvious she also wants a report.

The two shorter women cuddle by the flames and the tall one, almost taller than Dad, peers into our kitchen, her hands in her pockets. Dad is in the other room, probably watching the Tour de France highlights on the other TV but then emerges, bursting out of the room and wishing them good night.
Finally, our huge front door shudders back into the frame and they are gone. Almost instantly Dad is upstairs. There is ice cream in his beard and his eyes are wide and crazy.

‘Did they like it?’

Dad puts his finger up and peers past the TV, out the window.

‘Wait.’

We hear their voices below on the path.

There are trails of caster sugar on Dad’s apron, marking out his legs. Over his huge, hands veins run like power cables over the top.

‘Well, the flavour was well and truly there.’

Mum presses her fingers against her head and Dad refills her glass almost to the brim.

‘It broke. Didn’t it?’

He is smiling now. We are all smiling – a smile that is half agony and half the funniest thing in the world.

‘Completely fucked it.’

And then his huge laugh. Loud and big and bouncing around the room like dull thunder. He throws us both a square of chocolate and I immediately looks over to Damon to check that his piece is not bigger. Dad kisses Mum on her head and then is back down the stairs. I hear the clack of CD covers and then, the torn up cry of Cocker, his guitar strangling everything.

Tomorrow night we’ll eat stewed fruit on ice cream with shards of pastry. Dad will call it ‘rustic crumble’ and we’ll make loud noises, clinking our bowls with our spoons, so that he can hear us downstairs and feel that we are proud.
It is cold outside now and the lesbians’ light is off. I wonder who is sleeping next to who and if they lie like they walk – with the tallest one in the middle. Through the kitchen window, I see Damo on the plates in the sink. Steam rises up around his head, his thick freckles like dead bugs on the glass. I have tea towels around my feet and with a stick from the fire I watch the apple pie box scrunch and twist in the flame, like a swell pushing through invisible lines of rock.

11/02/1987

Rough on the beach today. The wind was churning up the water and bits of grass and weed were blowing everywhere. Bob went fishing again with Allan’s rods. He had them both stabbed into the sand and was standing in between with his arms crossed, studying the water. He is the most serious fisherman I’ve ever seen. Like a general,
the way he goes about things. Every time a rod dipped he’d run over and rip it out of
the sand, winding furiously. He needs to relax. Even I know that much.

There are lots of salmon at the moment. What beautiful fish, iridescent white bellies
with turquoise tops and long, jagged fins. Great fun to catch, apparently. It’s
something to do with the water and the current. That’s why they’re everywhere in the
waves. We saw a whole school this morning in the shorebreak. A huge black cloud of
them, fizzing along in the same direction. It’s the winds being bigger or something. I
can’t remember what Bob said. Too many directions and tides for me. Too many
details. I’m just happy to watch. Happy to draw them and study their beautiful
colours.

He and Allan caught 10 last night. I could hear their hoots between the loud thumps of
the shorebreak and little snippets of their conversation. I don’t see why we needed
that many. We don’t even have a fridge! I seem to be constantly reshuffling
everything in the eskies, shifting ice blocks to make room for fish we don’t even get
to eat. God, what I’d do for a fridge.

It was good to see them together like that. Bob had scales in his beard and smelled
like pilchards when he came to bed. And wine. They’re a formidable combination,
loud and full of stories. He is happy at the moment. I can see it in him in the way he
skips onto the beach with his pants rolled halfway up. A long time since I have seen
him like that. Not since we had the yacht in Darwin. He likes a challenge, I think is
what it is, something huge and impossible to set him into place. The yacht was a
mess, and he spent all those days sanding it, rubbing his hands down its sides. I can
still see those red shorts of his and his bulb of curly hair under the fluorescent lights of our yard. The radio, tins of beer at his feet. I enjoy watching him. The way he fanatically goes about things.

We are good together at the moment, and Damon is happy. He loves the campfire and the flashes of sparks that come out when Bob puts on new logs. He is almost talking too. It’ll be ‘fish’, or ‘salmon,’ or something like that. He follows Bob around the camp, grabbing at things and dragging the huge beach rods by their tips along the grass. He unspooled one of the new reels yesterday and had the reel dragging in the dirt. You forget how it is to be young like that.

Before money, that’s what it is. Before everything we do and think about is carved up and our imaginations dusted over like old furniture. He is an imaginative boy. A deep kind of child, I think. Serious, at times, like his father.

The fire is dangerous, though. Bob needs to build a wall. All I need is my first child walking into the flames. God help me! He loves the diving gear for some reason, too. I can’t get it off him. We give him the mask to wear around the camp and he wanders naked with it over his head all day. He’ll like growing up here, with all these beaches going off into the distance. All the coves and that delicious blue water. It really is a vision, better than Darwin, that’s for sure. Thank God we got out of there. Away from that heat. The way it clings to you. Exhausting. We’ll miss Ian and Pam and I’ll miss work I’m sure but this is good. This is what we will do.
The camp is looking good. Allan has lent us two sets of drawers and a giant Persian rug he got up in Canberra. In the morning, orange light streams in through the canvas and the rug comes to life with all its beautiful patterns and shapes. We have chests laid out around the edges of the tent, too. It’s beautiful. Part of me wishes we could just stay here. There is now a place for my art materials and somewhere to hang the ‘town clothes’ for when we need to go in.

I could live this way. Happily. In fact, I never want to see another tile or plaster wall in my life. I think of Darwin and those boxes on stilts with the sepia-toned carpet and yellow kitchens. The cloistered, dank hallways and fluorescent lights, terracotta-coloured linoleum curling up at the edges of the cupboards. So much for the Australian dream. Australian ugliness more like. And from that to here – our camp. This is something from Vogue or a movie set. The rug really does the trick. It’s a huge, deep red and Damon can sleep on it during the day. I lay there with him too. We feel the ground warming us.

We are coastal Bedouins, according to Bob. The dunes, the crooked, beaten down eucalypts, splotches of black reef, the estuary, all of it is our territory. God, if it wasn’t for National Parks, we’d stay forever. But they are good to us – Bob handles that. Paul, the ranger, is a nice man. A surfer too. Always around early, even before we are up, he is there in his green pants peering out to sea like he’s lost something or waiting for a ship to prick up over the horizon line. He turns a bit of a blind eye too – makes it a bit cheaper for us. Who would have thought camping would actually cost money? In the territory, you’d shoot a man before paying him to camp somewhere. Paul’s a nice man, though. Handsome too. Tall and thin with big, curly hair like Bob’s
and long spindly arms. He is always in khaki. Dark pants and lighter shirts with the orange and black lyre bird emblem of the Parks. He and his wife have a mud brick house in the forest. Mud brick is nice. Organic, but not too organic. Certainly not hippie.

Watching Paul the other day, a black dot in the water, I realised I hadn’t ever thought about surfers before. How they seem to move with the water, chasing and running from its various moods. Up and down, turning in car parks, arms out windows, looking at the wind in the trees. It is always a frenetic pursuit of something, as if they, in their little nervous groups, know something that we don’t. Always driving, leaning against the railings, stumbling down sand paths in their Ugg boots. It’s pointless in a way. Particularly around here. It’s so dumpy here. None of those long peeling waves that Bob says they like.
On the weekends we don’t have guests, Dad takes us to the beach. We are off a postcard. Bundled together with boards and towels and a blue esky that chills grapes and stubbies of VB for Dad. Mum has a one-piece bathing suit and a droopy beach hat. She lies under the Lavazza coffee umbrella Dad has pulled from one of the tables on the deck, sitting under its giant piece of shade. She is sketching in her book. Inspecting the feathers of a dead seabird that has washed up on the sand, lifting its dried out frame with the end of her pen. Tilting its head this way and that.

If there are people, Dad wears bathers. They are blue with white strings and the material has begun to stretch. But today he is naked, driving out through the shore
break with his back like a bit of rock in the whitewash. Dad is good at swimming. He beat Dawn Fraser in the 50m pool in Sale as a kid and would have gone to the Olympics if they let him. I watch his arms pulling at the water and soon there is just his head, rising and dropping behind the waves.

There is a strong wind tearing across the beach. At the northern end near the point, the swells bob and jump behind a line of rocks. There are good abalone out there, Dad says. Instead of being green or scratched-up white, the water is purple – dark from the bull kelp and crags of rock underneath. Close by, I see the yellow hose of an abalone boat. Dad says that you could get a licence for $20 when they first arrived, but now they are expensive and that you’re ‘printing money’ if you have one. There are only two ab crews in our town. We spot them all the time, lugging their boats down the National Park roads, their sun-twisted faces at the ramps.

I watch the man on the boat throw the hose into the water. For a moment it sits there in wobbly lines on the surface before slipping under. I can hear the generator too, gurgling. It sounds like our mower. A constant groaning sound. Spitting rocks and dried up cricket balls from the grass.

I wonder if it is true. If there are, as Dad and his friends say, abalone everywhere. ‘Like fireweed’, ‘size of dinner plates.’ There are shells everywhere in our home. We pile them under the trees in the orchard and let their guts seep into the dirt to make the plums grow. They go on the outdoor tables for our parties, with knotted cigarettes pushed inside. Mum keeps them in our bathroom to hold the soap and in the cottages, giant ones from the eighties hold clusters of Ferrero Rocher we give to the guests.
They are all part of the lie we tell to people that stay. But we’ve been in Tanja for years now, and maybe it’s just the collection of things over time, like a midden.

Dad had another family before us and in every photo his hair is white. Big and curly like when he was a kid, he says, but white and grey like campfire ash. He was 42 when he and mum had Damo and even older when I was born. Old with rough hands and a back that makes him lean forward all the time. He dove a lot when I was young. Apparently, he and Allan from down the road would go out at Middle and get dressed on the rocks, putting plastic bags on their feet to get into their wetsuits. Dad says they even saw a shark once, a wobbegong with a wide rubbery mouth and camouflage head. Dad’s stuff sits next to the Fowlers jars in the lean-to now. His wetsuit has holes and smells like rust and his snorkel had dirt in it when Damon tried to make it into a pipe. Perhaps it’s just like dogs pissing on trees. How people tell stories to prove they were there.

The hose leads in a single line back to the boat. One man sits looking at the reef below, adjusting dials and racing back to the wheel to keep the boat facing into the swells as they approach. Ab divers work in teams. One is underwater, gliding over ribs of sand that separate the bombies. They pick the abalone, judging their size and pifffing the smaller ones. The bigger abs they stuff into netted bags that get hauled to the surface. They work like this for hours. Always two – the top man looking at the reef and scanning the open water for the bigger waves that come in. He looks around for sharks, too. Stares at the gulls in the distance, wary of schools of baitfish that come too close to shore. At some point they sit together. The diver pulls himself into the boat and they have lunch, eating sandwiches that go wet in their hands. It’s a shit
life, Dad says, relying on the sea like that. ‘Having your work dictated to you by blotches on screens… Too bloody dangerous, too, with everything that can happen.’

I stab the nose of the Carabine through the chop and the rip pushes me out over some rock. I feel water draining thin over its top. Damo is already out, his red fishing-float-hair screaming against the blue. A wave sloshes in and I push down hard on the rails, feeling it pass over. Damo says to dive down deep if I get in trouble. Under the waves, it is still and quiet and with everything going on above, I can relax. It’s murky green down there and the sand is blurry and the colour of biscuit. I try to imagine swimming out near the abalone down the beach by the cliffs, where the northeasterly hits hard against the rocks and the whitewater is smeared farther out.

Another wave washes through and this time I dip through the wall, feeling it drag me back. If you duck through too high the wave will flip you upside down and you’ll land on the flats. If you duck too low it’ll push you back into the sand. ‘Surfing is about sweet spots,’ Damo says. ‘Like in cricket when it’s coming out of your hand just right and you know where it’ll land. It’s when you can read the swells. When you look at a beach and it talks back to you.’

For me, surfing is just what I imagine it is. It is like Swan Lake and I can glide and spin and hurtle forward. The sun is my spotlight and the sand the crowd. Mum and Dad sit under the Lavazza umbrella and marvel at what I can do. I make long white lines when I turn and big squiggled patches when I fall. There is always a different type of water to show me what I’ve done. Every bit reflected back, like when you
stare at a TV screen and your life is there too. The shapes of all your heads, the outline paintings on the wall.

Everything I see is cut and re-sketched. After surfs, when Mum folds sheets and Damon types on the computer with stacks of printed paper around him, I am watching a movie in my head with no plot and no end. It’s the first time I’ve felt like this; like there is a thing that goes on forever. As if the ocean, with all its weight leaning in against the National Park, is making a life for me that is not real. I wonder if other people think about surfing like this. Like it’s a dream I’m somehow stuck inside.

My board slaps down a final wave and suddenly I’m out the back. I see Damo, arms folded in the cold. It’s just the two of us. We are past everything. Alone. If we paddled forward there would be nothing but the ocean. Just blue and wind and plastic. We would die before we saw another person. They’d scoop us out of the water with huge nets and balance our boards, my Carabine and his Aloha, in a stack on the boat and motor us back. Our hair and board shorts would dry before we got to land. There would be newspapers, TV news and Mum and Dad wouldn’t swim anymore. Some would say it was rip or the cold, but I’d know it wasn’t, that it was just me trying to impress my brother.

After our surf it is announced that we will go to town for supplies. There are new guests coming to the Orchard cottage, and things must be prepared. Cleaned. We lie one of the seats down and Dad shoves the boards in. Damo tries to correct them so
that their wax doesn’t rub but Dad is already hovering with his hand on the boot and so it is straight to our seats. He has been waiting for us to come in, standing with his arm bolt upright on the beach. In the car Damon splays his legs wide and I am crunched against the door. A layer of dust paints itself through the bush as we head up through the National Park. Damo has a new way of walking and sitting now. Because he is older, he gets more ball space than me. I get a sliver, enough to see the floor of the car between my legs but no more. ‘It is a thing you earn,’ he says. ‘Like money’.

We sit on towels to keep the seats dry. The Nissan is our other car but it is rented so everything must have a protective layer. Dad has left the factory plastic on the seat backs to keep them clean. It is hot against our backs and sweat gathers in a puddle behind our bums, mixing with the saltwater from our shorts and running sideways as we hit the corners.

Mum is drawing in the front and looks up to follow a wallaby scurry into the bush. There is an exhibition coming up and everything she does is of Bangalow palms and big crooked trees. Long trunks and leaves spearing out like knives. Dad says that she should paint bigger.

‘Like Pollock,’ he says, pointing to the walls of our living room. ‘Give them something to chew on.’

Mum nods and sips her wine, wondering how and why she has come to rely on his advice so much. Considering where she stands in all of it.

‘People have forgotten about the landscape, Veronica. There’s a market in that, you know.’
Soapranos is closed when we arrive. Its blue door shut, the sign hung. Dad swears, punching the wheel before riding up on the grass and running to the window. I jump out to follow, unsticking my balls from my thigh. Our laundry bag sits locked in the middle of the office. Each hospitality venue in our area has its own colour for laundry bags. The Marlin hotel outside town is green and the Harbor Master, the town’s only restaurant, is red. A scribbled piece of paper details the items we’ve had cleaned. 7 x King, 3 x Queen, 14 x towels, 2 x bags of clothes, 2 x tablecloths (new). Further inside on each washing machine a small red light flashes, broadcasting the laundry’s inaction. On the other side of the room the dryers are quiet, their doors cruelly waving at us. Above, a pinboard advertises local jobs. Someone wants lawn mowing. A dog is missing. There is yoga.

‘For Christ’s sake!’

Dad bangs his fist on the window and turns out across the town. It is quiet. Slow. A few figures mull around in the supermarket, lifting their arms at things on the shelves. One woman gets too close to the entrance and an automated ‘hello’ sounds out from the door. When she leaves its says ‘hello’ again. I wonder why they need a buzzer when the store is so small and what the equivalent would be at home. If there could be a siren for when guests are approaching. Some type of emergency horn we could install.

The bottle shop is already open. There are two signs on the lawn. One says ‘Petrol, Bait, Pies’ and points back across the road at the service station where two kids from my brother’s school have filled up their ute. They exchange silent nods with Damo
before screeching off. Their number plate says ‘GET SUM’ and just before asking Damo what it means I stop and combine a laugh with a nod to show him it's funny too.

The other sign advertises VB. $30 for a case. In the picture, perfect droplets of water run down the side of a stubby. A rough hand like Dad’s holds it on an angle. Proud. Proudly drunk. Dad appears from the bottle shop with a case in his hands.

‘Yeah mate no dramas. I’ll make sure he does,’ he yells back.

For a second it looks like the advertising has worked, but then Dad always drinks VB.

The wind has changed East and past the church near the boat ramp the water is white. The shape of the swells has been lost, camouflaged by chop.

‘Messy out there now,’ Dad says, holding the case in one hand and opening the boot with the other. He throws the beers on our boards and I see Damo’s eyes tighten. His Aloha is new. $300 dollars from Merimbula’s secondhand surf shop with glassed in fins and a white tail pad that we re-stuck with liquid nails. It is the most expensive thing he owns and when Damo is away, I pull it out of its cover and paddle it on his bed imagining Indonesia or surfing the river mouth at 6 foot with no one out.

In the distance, a dinghy motors in. I can hear its hull slapping against the water and the outboard fizzing when the boat launches over the chops. There are two of them, bent and small like ants. Fisherman from down south, I guess, trawling for kingies or dropping lines for flatheads.
Soapranos is the only laundry in the area. It sits at the end of the block with lino floors and a pile of Women’s Weeklies in which Diana is still alive. It has six giant machines, like small cars that strip dirt from anything. You can smell Soapranos from across the park. The proud stink of laundry powder. There is a giant tub of it in the corner for when people forget their own. But it is nothing fancy and has none of those blue specs that make hurricanes in your machine.

The sheets, the towels, our uniforms, we wash everything here – all of it in those bags. All of it a secret we pay them to keep. I wonder what they know about us really. With the bloodied sheets and the tea towels dad wraps around failed dishes. I wonder if every time Mum drags a bag in from the Nissan, dumping it on the lino floor, they are working us out. Somehow sensing our weakness. I wonder if they know that Elly from down the road snuck into Damon’s room and made sex noises until right before the bus? If they know that Mum has been sleeping in the Seaview? That we use sheets as tablecloths and clean the floors with towels. That during Christmas we cover the ham with a pillowcase. Do they know any of this? I suspect they do.

Like the car, we don’t own any of it. It is all borrowed. Rented, like sound equipment at a party. My Carabine, the computer, our house, everything I touch is a line on a sheet of paper. A sheet that has Mum and Dad’s names at the bottom that says that the B’n’B isn’t ours and if the gallery doesn’t work they’ll take it all from us.
Huge storms during the night. Damon cried the whole time and twice Bob had to go out to re-dig the trenches around the tent. Half our things are hanging in the tea trees to dry. All the clothes and towels. The still life I had just finished is soaked also. Ruined I suspect. This tent is meant to be indestructible. People will say anything to sell you something. It infuriates me. It was a lovely tent but God forbid I’d wish it to keep me dry. To keep all the paper I have here dry.

Bob is sheepish today. He’s gone walking up to Middle Beach. I can see them both in the distance, two little black dots on the sand. He’s looking for diving spots apparently, something about when the ocean calms down and us eating giant beautiful abalone. It’s because he feels guilty about last night, I can tell. He was skulking around all morning retying the guide ropes that had gone loose. On and on he went. Fighting something in his head. I leave him when he’s like that. It’s far worse to talk about it. He gets jumpy and storms off and then all of a sudden it’s my fault and we’ve had a fight.

It’s definitely wearing him down. The camping, and all the uncertainty. He worries about me. I’m happy, but I think he knows that this can’t last forever. We can’t camp like this forever. We are not protestors. We are not hippies. We have a child. God, there will be four of us soon and we live in a series of tents. Paul doesn’t come by anymore. I don’t think we’ve paid him for months. The only time we see him now is at his place.
What a place they have up there. Saskia cooked flathead the other night that Paul had caught at Bithrey’s. She can certainly cook, much better than I can. Everything was neat and precise and she still managed to enjoy herself, taking huge gulps of wine. It is an art form to cook like that I think, effortless, graceful and exact. At least we have an excuse not to invite them down here. I’m not sure how salmon in foil would stand up against that.

There is definitely something unique about it up there. It’s a crazy sort of place. There are stereo speakers in the trees and a bus on the hill from when they first arrived. God, I just imagine what Helen would think, what she’d do if it was her here with Bob and not me. With her huge pearls and white safari suit. She’d have a fit. ‘What a mess,’ she’d say. She couldn’t handle it. Well, she didn’t in the end, anyway.

They are quite alternate though, Paul and Saskia. Not freaks and very intelligent but it’s all a kind of madness up there, like the place itself is a loose sketch. I admire them really. They came here 4 years before we even knew about the place, before Allan even knew! They are visionaries, I suppose. More progressive than us, for sure, but it’s great how they just went out and did it. Fucked off the city and came down here and carved something out. A unique and creative life – something different.

And who cares, anyway. It’s a marvellous paradox, the city. It seems you spend half your time moving and half your time waiting to move. And those dull landscapes. That’s what I miss the least. All the squares of brick and how the sun bounces off everything creating that saturated steely light. Now I know why Jeffery Smart paints
all the people so small in his paintings. It makes you tiny, the city. God, it made me nervous scurrying about like that.

Darwin was better, I suppose. It was probably more us than anything else by that time. More the affair. At least in Darwin, there was the Kimberley and the rivers. The safety of the yacht. Really, Colin really could have fought harder. I was his wife for God’s sake, and there I was with Bob. He could have tried harder for his own sake if nothing else, that’s all. I think about him less and less now, more a curiosity than something that stops you, that makes you sit. Well, as long as you learn from it. As long as you learn, it’s not a mistake. Isn’t that what they say? It would have been a very different story with Colin.

Outside our lives and the affair, Darwin had its own kind of madness when I think about it. Conservative white meets long grass meets Asia. I remember riding to work one morning. It was hot and sticky with the saccharine smell of mangoes on the bitumen and everyone’s faces already whining with sweat. There was an Aboriginal women walking to work. She was neatly dressed and holding a matching handbag. Like something from a mission she was, neat little shoes – the whole thing very orderly and correct. Those government bastards would have been happy to see her, how she was, all wrapped up in a little bow. Then, as she was walking, out of nowhere she dropped her bag and darted off under the trees. I didn’t know what was happening. I though maybe she’d heard something, maybe someone was in trouble. But then out she came holding a goanna. A giant goanna too. There was purple blood coming out of its mouth. I remember the horrible sound of it hissing before she smacked its head on the curb. Whack. Dead. And then she picked up her handbag and
kept walking. The bag in one arm and goanna in the other. That was Darwin. I could just imagine her arriving at work, probably at one of the big departments or the Royal Darwin. Perhaps the school. Imagine her stuffing the goanna into the kitchenette fridge next to the peanut butter sandwiches and the milk. God, how insane, what times!

Chapter 4

Every lump is hard like chewing gum. Like those pieces out of your cricket bag after the council has buried the pitch for the footy season. Every bit takes with it a flake of
the wall, leaving exposed mud brick behind. I see the dirt and toothpick lengths of straw that hold it together. There are flecks of granite and bits of clay. The room smells of dirt, dusty, like an empty creek. It’s a house made of earth; a piece of ground that’s been slopped in on itself with our stuff thrown inside. Every line looks hand drawn, the walls and timber poles only straight in passing.

I hate this wall. The fact it’s made of shit. That it’s white and they never let me paint it. I hate that kids tease me at school for being a hippie and think that mum ate my placenta. I hate having to move like this. Up and down. Out of my own room, like a refugee.

Damon bursts through the door, scoops up another box of my things and leaves. He is one of them today, a management figure – not my brother. Almost everything has been shifted or cleaned already. The Carabine, my maroon school jumpers. The paintings I did of Dad. They’ve even dusted the lamp by the bed and replaced my sheets with the white ones for guests.

Mum says ‘it’s only temporary’, but it’s not. I know how real estate inside a family house is divvied up. It’s summer, and there will be more guests straight after. Damon has at least had a say in this. He is too accepting, too efficient for this all to be free. He appears again, gathering another box, resting a single pillow on top. A payment of some kind has been made. He’ll probably go to Melbourne for this, or be allowed to stay at that girl’s house in Cobargo. The ‘troglodyte,’ Mum calls her. She bends over like a monkey and digs at the cork floors when she says it. If her and Dad have been drinking there is hooting too. Damo gets upset by this and Dad apologises, saying it’s
unfair to speak about people in that way. But when he slams his door to play Nirvana, Dad agrees that she’s an idiot. That half our town are idiots and that she is squarely one of them.

She has big breasts though. Like the milk bladders they stuff into the thick shake machines at McDonalds. They are wide and unsteady, exaggerating every corner on the school bus. It won’t last. I know it. Their msn conversations are long and drawn out. My room is behind the computer and when they are chatting there is more time spent not typing than typing. Of him just sitting there, the office chair creaking. I imagine the cursor flashing on their chat screens. Pray for them to have something in common.

It’s just hooking up,’ he says as he reorders CDs.

He says it loosely and casually as if we are talking about playing cricket or discussing what’s for dinner. It is no longer a novelty for him now, the sex. It is like eating, or push-ups, or HSC study. Something he must keep doing. A thing he’s built into his routine.

‘You’ll know what I mean,’ he says, one of Dad’s VBs hidden between his legs.

‘Wait till you root Jess. Then you’ll know.’

I always imagine rooting Jessica. That, like Damon’s study and his bacon and eggs on Saturday, is part of my routine. But when I do, it is not like a rabbit. There is cuddling, even speaking. I am tangled in her river sand hair and the water is rocking us to sleep. We will be lovers, not fuckers. But when I imagine them, it is like a computer game where the player is stuck half in the wall and half out, jolting backward and forward on repeat as if there is a glitch. They are too different – too
much space between them. Damon is going to Melbourne next year anyway, so it doesn’t matter.

There are two meat pies by my door. Mum has put them there. I can smell the gristle and factory pastry from the ladder.

‘You don’t get pies for nothing,’ Damon once told me, right before they called him into a room and drained his bank account to buy chairs for the Seaview cottage. I look down at them, neat and round with the heat rising in thin wisps. They are a test, and if I eat them I will lose. Once they are gone and there is red on my lips and in the bits between my nails, they will have me. Damon gets Melbourne. I get pies. Two hot Four and Twenties, cooked at one eighty with real sauce, not that homemade shit.

Every time I am ousted from my room it becomes more painful. When you are really young, your parents come and go as they please, placing and stacking your clothes and changing the sheets on your bed. It is different now. Under each cavity there is something they cannot know. Weapons, torn out ads of pretty women. It is a whole life that I don’t want them to see. My life.

Moving rooms was fun once, too. A game where the ocean bounced from the walls in different ways. I followed their steps with no complaints. Obedient and trusting, itching the flannelette on my back itching my salted skin. Damo would already be there, his bed heaped with pillows and the only duck feather doona. It was all an adventure. Something we did together before our versions of the world got bigger and other rooms and walking the house at night became the paddock next to ours and Damon leading me through surf as high as our roof.
Dad has peeled the Triple J sticker off my CD player and loaded it with a Tracy Chapman CD for the guests. I move the ladder across the wall, digging its feet into the carpet before climbing back up.

‘You’ve got to hurry up. They’re here at 5!’

Damon is there again, getting more boxes. He stacks two on top of each other, clipping the door frame on his way out.

‘Fuck.’

Dad is in town buying supplies for dinner. It is pasta marinara so it will be the Coles deli for the mixed seafood and then the pasta aisle for spaghetti or breaking up pasta sheets if he wants them to think we’ve made it ourselves.

The pot is already on the stove hurling steam at the roof. Damon is on kitchen duty tonight and has changed into his black McDonalds pants and black polo shirt. His hair is tall and wiry from our surf yesterday and his freckles are jutting out. I will do dishes with him after, but before it is just him and Dad; Damon plating, washing and drying and Dad grating and chopping, having fleeting conversations with the guests.

My posters sit in a single heap on the floor with ripped corners and hard bits of blue tack still stuck on. It is a whole world of surfing. Patches of moody blue and black. Green jungle. The sun bashing a desert. There are expired cars with limestone sand blowing them apart and the mothballed ocean behind. The cars blend into the desert and only the reflection of their windscreens or side windows make them visible. Black squares of shadow hang off the back wheels and deeper in, toward the point, surfers’ paths to the rocks draw lines of red that
cut through the undergrowth. It is Western Australia and one day Damon and I will go there together when he gets his ‘Troopy’ and has money from a job.

Some of the other posters feature surfers looking into the camera lens, almost unaware of the huge bodies of water behind them. Some do lazy bottom turns like toy soldiers half falling over. Others are more dramatic, hacking at the pocket, ripping the wave. Then there are the bikini girls on the other side of every poster. I keep them against the wall because I think Mum would be offended if my bedroom had just naked women. They are all under a shower or leaning against a fence in a Hawaiian backyard with a hose gushing over them. Every one of them being slowly drowned one way or another.

‘They’re here.’

Damon picks up the posters and rolls them into a tube. I scamper down the ladder and fold it awkwardly before chucking it out the side window. We have secret passages, Damo and I. Ways of getting to and from the cottages and sheds without being seen. We are just like those servants in old mansions that move around in staircases and corridors you never know about. Like rats in the walls, ferrying things backward and forward, stealing food when we can. But if you are seen, never run. Stop and with any luck Mum or Dad will arrive and you can go free. Failing that, you must speak. You mention the beach, art or the olive trees. You carve a bit off and throw it at their feet.

‘Get Mum.’

Damon peers out the window next to the ladder at two cars coming down the driveway. The slow crunching of the blue metal tells us it is definitely not Dad
coming back from town. Instead, there are two black sedans with tinted windows. I jump out and pull the ladder through before rushing into the garden. It snags on the tea trees and a branch bends back and whips me in the face. The whole thing opens up and I have to stop and press in the clips before folding it and moving on again. It’s two hundred meters to the shed, through a thick patch of tea trees and after that the orchard where Dad grows thick lines of dope that run along the ground under the tomatoes. Through the trees I can see them assembling in the car park. A stocky Japanese man opens the driver-side door and stretches. He looks up at the trees, resting his hands on his hips and flexing back. Then he is pointing at something above. The others assemble around him to gaze up. Three children, a woman and an older, grey-haired man bent over a stick. There are two others in the car also but they stay put. One opens the window, sniffs the air and closes it again. They are all looking up, squinting at the cockatoos in the trees with lines of shade across their face. A pinecone falls onto the roof of the first sedan, and another spears into the ground beside.

Thud.

They yell. The woman runs back around the car with her hands over her head and the old man drops his stick, jumping into the back seat, and then they stay like that. The two cars, side-by-side, engines running.

There are three giant pine trees around 40 meters high next to the car park. They have been there forever and are one of the only introduced species we have. Dad says they are good reminders of how European vegetation has ruined the environment. Damo
and I love them because we have built a rope swing on one and when there are no guests we roll the 44 gallon drum from the lean-to and use it as a platform to jump and swing out across the hill. Dad is always trimming their branches but can’t take the tress out because it is too expensive. Sap always falls on the cars and it pools and then sets in the hail dints. When it storms, there is often a branch that has landed and exploded on the ground. Usually Dad will meet guests and direct them further up the driveway where a new car park has been made. We have spray-painted rocks and laid them out in a big circle but the grass has started to grow up around them and it looks like an archeological site, the beginning of a town or temple where people were killed.

‘That’s the ambassador.’ Damon has appeared behind me and picks up the back end of the ladder.

‘His house is the size of an entire block. Butlers and everything.’

We both strain to look into the car, but all we can see are heads. In the back, two snow white dogs lean out the window, tongues flapping.

I had never seen an ambassador or politician before. The only ones I know are John Howard and Philip Ruddock because Dad swears at them on the TV. He says John Howard is a weasel and even if he was going to pay double we wouldn’t let him stay. He says they should be punished along with Trevor Chapel for doing the underarm bowl and people who poach abalone and leave their shells in heaps.

Dad wants to be a politician. I can tell because he uses more words than he needs and his letters to my teachers sound like newspaper articles. When we watch The 7:30 Report I imagine him arguing with Peter Costello or walking through a factory with his sleeves rolled up.
‘Hi there.’

Mum is walking to the car. She is wearing a long coloured dress and her bangles are jingling. Damon and I make a break for it, hitting the last 50 meters of the orchard at top speed. We lean the ladder against the wall of the shed and Damon goes panting into his new bed. He lies down and puts his headphones on. I go through the sheet into my room. Mum has put a picture of a wave by my bed with some art materials so I can draw. I don’t listen to much music yet. Mum and Damon got me a CD player but spend more time wondering what to play than I do with it actually on. Damo says I should get into rock music to start because they are the best musicians and from there I can like anything.

In between the cottages and painting, Mum has been decorating the shed all week. There are Persian rugs laid out over the pavers and candles hanging from the roof. A small kitchen has been erected; plastic tables, a BBQ and a kettle for Mum and Dad to make tea in the mornings. The old bar fridges from the cottages are lined up in a row, humming in different rhythms. My room is the smallest with a single white sheet for the entrance and a trundle bed that rolls across the floor when I get in. Mum and Dad have a blowup mattress in their room and their clothes have been thrown into baskets. Mum has brought her necklace tree and her sketchbooks are stacked in makeshift shelves with bricks on the ends. Their room is always catching up to everything else. Even in the house, it is the messiest place. Baskets and clothes and stacks of unwashed sheets. As if Damon and I and the B’n’B are on a head start and then it is Mum and Dad behind, their relationship slower or injured in some way.
18/10/1989

We visited some land today. There is a man named Pido who apparently owns half the area. He sold Allan his property and now, for reasons unknown to us, seems to be selling off a whole number of his other properties. Allan suspects he’s in debt. Bob and I have seen his car twice now, limping into town, and I remember watching him buy a loaf of sourdough at the bakery with coins he kept in a jar. It is a strange place, this place really, you can own half the land but still struggle to live.
The property was 60 acres. It had two gullies that ran downward, separating the block into three hillsides. It all looks east toward the ocean and there is a stream that goes all the way into the neighbouring farm. He’s a cattle farmer apparently.

It was completely empty other than three pine trees. Three black pines that went up thirty metres with branches that jutted out in every direction. They looked like figures, old giants presiding over the hill.

The rest is empty. Completely. Other than the sandy brown of tussocks and their tiny razor edges there is nothing there. But what an amazing site. When the wind sped over the hill the entire paddock changed colour. In a second it went from gold to a molasses brown and back again. Every gust created a new tone as the wind pressed the tussocks one way or the other. I just wanted to draw it. It was spectacular.

Of course, Bob was already halfway down the hill stepping things out. Piecing together the house in his head, placing rooms and doors and deciding where the poles will be set. Down past the pine trees is where I’d like it to be where it folds over just slightly and seems to throw you out at that thin strip of ocean in the distance.

Allan spent the whole time leaning against the fence. He was gnawing on some plums he had in his car, spitting the pips out at his feet before pulling another from the bag. We were directing Bob across the hill to look at natural springs and places for dams. It was quite fun actually, ordering him this way and that. I kept saying that it was too slippery for me, too dangerous but the truth is that I was very happy watching him
scamper around. Seeing him there with those tattered shorts and his huge red beard sparking in the light.

It is an enormous property. Every bit of it juts as if it is the bow of a huge ship cracking up ice into praline pieces of white. You could see Allan’s house from the top, too. The bending lines of his olive trees, his studio and the red fire hint of coral trees that dot his driveway. Behind Allan’s is the coast. A belt of stark blue with a slight dip where Middle Beach sits. Apparently you can see the tops of the breakers during big storms from up there. The wisps of white flick off the waves as they come in, and you can seem them above the eucalypts.

I love it. The space and sound of the forest where Paul and Saskia are. The outlines of the houses below and the road dissecting everything. It would make an amazing painting from up there, a complete scene it is really. A life.

There’s a lot to do, though. Bob had a go at pulling a few of the tussocks as if he was practising for the task and cut his hand straightaway. There are thousands of them to be ripped out. Allan says the soil is good too, rich and dark. We could plant anything here, he reckons. Not mangoes or papaya, but natives. The stuff of the Australian bush, twisted with that gouache wash of dryness all over it. Rugged, contorted ochres. Striking, not beautiful. That’s what I want. Casuarinas, and banksias. Like we have been here forever. I see us here. I can imagine Damon and his little brother flopping over tussocks in their gumboots. I can see us stopping and not moving again. We are no longer running, no longer heavy-breathed and hidden in the dark under Bob’s house. There is no yelling, no crying, just this new place and a hill that might be ours.
You lose yourself a bit when you move into something that’s been built for someone else. That caters for their life and not yours. You are amending everything, compensating. That’s why I think we are building, or will build when we get somewhere. It is us deciding who we are and translating all those thoughts and conversations into something real. I don’t want to move again. I want a house with lots of room and a bath that sits outside. I want space for my art. I want us to laugh more and for Damon to learn. I want Bob to relax. I want him to feel proud of himself again.

It’s funny what a new place creates in your mind, the peculiar memories it pries off. I’ve been thinking a lot about my childhood recently, about moving so much. I found myself thinking about Dad when we were up there on the hill. I even had a recollection of Ok Rubber, of that bitter stench of car tyres, the sounds of the mechanics with the prostitutes from next door and that horrendous spinning sign we built on the roof.

I lived in 18 houses by the time I was twenty and have distinct memories of my mother talking to men in the backs of vans as they shaved new sets of keys for whatever place we were headed. We were always taping boxes. Always assembled on the floor, flicking through albums before using them to separate the vases. I can’t even open a marker now without that sickly smell triggering a fit of anxiety about the whole process starting again.
It was a game of musical chairs. With bank logos, always changing. I remember I’d always look at the envelopes and inspect their logos. Abstract triangles for the modern ones and baroque aristocratic swirls for the banks that were ‘high brow’. Yellow and red for the family-oriented and green, blue and purple for the innovative, investment-driven banks. God, and then all the times it wasn’t banks at all but chats outside in the dark or against cars that seemed to be always running.

But it was musical chairs, with Mum quiet, Dad pissed and the banks firing ink through the door. How many businesses, I don’t even know. Every one of them with an accelerated life cycle, like a mosquito or fruit fly. Opening, closing, shutting down, garage sales. In some ways, it was like a frantic game of Monopoly where someone seemed always to have counted our money wrong and our team symbol was a silver bottle of scotch headed towards empty. On the brink of being thrown, swept up and bought again.

We all shared a bottle of wine at the car once Bob had finished his measurements. He is immensely fit at the moment from riding to and from work over the mountain, and came bounding up the hillside with his calves jutting out of his legs. Allan too, both of them sprinting then laughing when they got to the top. There is certainly some competition between them. Bob is bigger, with broad shoulders and a bursting chest but Allan is smooth, fixing you in those green eyes before saying what he thinks. They are becoming great friends those two.
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