

LINES to the HORIZON

Australian Surf Writing

Foreword by
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Foreword – Jock Serong

When I started submitting work to surfing magazines, long before I dreamed of writing fiction, I tried to follow an identifiable set of footprints. It was a small enough scene at that stage that you could meet the entirety of it during happy hour at the Torquay pub on Easter Saturday. Especially if you were running a tab.

The Australian writers I could find back then were Derek Hynd, Andrew Kidman, Phil Jarratt and Nick Carroll. Kidman infused his writing with wisdom from other realms: his interests in music, filmmaking and design. Hynd was an outlier, raging and clawing at the Establishment. Jarratt and Carroll operated as prolific, well-connected sports journos with, in Jarratt's case, an instinct for business writing.

There was the odd hybrid of a different sort, like Michael Gordon, the nationally respected journalist who was equally at home writing about the archaeology of the Dreamtime, federal politics or the history of Bells Beach. His early death was a loss to both journalism and surfing.

Then came a generation of highly entertaining writer/editors with a side-hustle in long-form biography—Sean Doherty, Tim Baker and Derek Reilly. It was a smart ruse—easiest Christmas present in the world, Mum: the Fanning book. This generation of writers—and by this stage, I too—was backed by great editors like Keith Curtain, Vaughan Blakey and Luke Kennedy: people who haven't had mega-budgets to throw at projects, but who burn with a phosphorescent passion for surfing, its protagonists and scribes.

The names I've reeled off are each exceptional craftsmen. But they're exclusively male, and their realm is non-fiction. That's partially a reflection of my experience, and partially me bumping

at the disappointing limits of the culture: there has yet to be a female editor of a major surf media outlet in this country. Favel Parrett surfs and writes award-winning fiction (and therefore, by conjunction, is a surf-writer); Rebecca Olive is doing innovative academic work about surfing, gender and society; and Sally Breen straddles the worlds of academic writing, fiction and commentary. Madelaine Dickie wrote *Troppo*, rich with Indonesian surfing references, before I'd dreamed of *On the Java Ridge*. But only *Surfing World's* Lauren Hill and *Tracks'* Emily Brugman come to mind as regular female surfing correspondents in Australia. It's not enough. The women who appear in this book are carriers of a vital flame.

This is not to say that women are under-represented in our surfing history: Isabel Letham was as much a part of the birth of Australian surfing at Freshwater as the Duke himself. It is to say that the contribution of our women needs to be given a voice.

From the early, underpaid pioneers like Pam Burridge, Jodie Cooper and Pauline Menczer, through to the era of elite athletes like Layne Beachley, Stephanie Gilmore and Tyler Wright, our female surfers have dominated the world. All around our coast now, girls are growing up in the expectation that the line-up is theirs, as much as it is the blokes'. Middle-aged women who endured a longstanding culture of machismo and territorial aggression in the water are now seeing their perseverance rewarded. Boorishness remains, sadly, but I know my daughters can see role models, and they'll become examples themselves, with time.

In 2016, I embarked on a little writing exercise. I'd rarely, if ever, read fiction about surfing that avoided cliché and found an essence that surfers and non-surfers could agree upon. The stand-out exceptions, to me, were Malcolm Knox's *The Life* (a thinly veiled portrait of the Peterson family) and Tim Winton's coming-of-age novel *Breath* (Mark Smith's Winter trilogy, with its riff on post-apocalyptic empty line-ups, was yet to come). *Breath* conveyed the elemental terror of a deep, dark hold-down to people who had

never experienced one. After my mum read the book she said something like ‘Now I understand what you boys were on about ...’ As far as I know, she wasn’t referring to autoerotic asphyxiation.

The exercise I set myself was to try writing a little passage of surfing fiction. I wrote about a girl on a wave in the tropics, and the handful of paragraphs grafted itself mysteriously onto a rant I was writing about our treatment of refugees. The result was a novel called *On the Java Ridge* and, to my ongoing delight, the brief passage about the girl surfing survived countless rounds of edits and made the final pages.

The point of the story, I think, is that writing about surfing is harder than it looks. Surfing by its very nature is ephemeral: whatever is written upon a wave is instantly erased. Nobody can agree whether this is a sport, or a culture, a sensual entwining with nature itself, a dance, or a form of meditation ... or none of these. Emily Brugman writes of the sea’s pitiless indifference: the Wintonian notion that ‘I love the sea, but it does not love me’. Wandering through Mexico, Madelaine Dickie sees the ocean as refuge, and the land as a malevolent realm. Yet the other side of the very same ocean can offer Sally Breen a fecund source of urban culture, rich enough to feed a lifetime of watching people and writing about them.

So who *are* the surfers? Whose language do you use? The contradictions will never be resolved. A lifetime of doing it leaves you with just as many unanswered questions as the day you started.

In these pages, three men join Breen, Brugman and Dickie. Jake Sandtner has conjured a claustrophobic intimacy with the racing thoughts inside Taj Burrow’s head. For Sam Carmody, writing about surfing is an exploration of one’s own soul, a search for slow healing. And Mark Smith studies the surfing lives of others with a clear-eyed detachment that finds still more motives for doing what we do: for partaking in a reverse penguin-parade that defies all definition but makes perfect sense.

The six pieces show it is the immersion and the articulation that is important, not the perfection. The opening of a wave pool

in Melbourne has pushed this ambiguity into the foreground. My friends go regularly: I have no desire to join them. All the perfect waves you could ever want, customised, on demand, and the idea leaves me flat. Despite calling myself a writer, I have neither the nouns and verbs, nor the sequence of thoughts, to describe why that is. Perhaps I'm just a grump. Perhaps it's imperfection that we writers chase.

Writing about surfing is more important for Australians than it ever was. Such is surfing's dominance in our self-image that to understand the nation it is necessary to interrogate the paddlers of Snapper, Bondi, Shipsterns, Gnaraloo and the countless, nameless sandbank peaks in between. Scientists have recently come to a new understanding of cool temperate reefs in Australia—that all of them are linked by an identifiable common biology into one vast biomass: the Great Southern Reef, stretching from Kalbarri to the Tweed. The other thing that links them is the surfers floating above. We are part of this.

Surfers live the change of days, of seasons, of the climate itself, every time they paddle out. Standing in the carpark, peering at lines in the half-dark, we are collecting data. I would venture to say there is no greater store of data about coastal conditions, accumulating in real time, every single day, around sixty thousand kilometres of coastline, than that which is collected in all our salty heads. We grunt under our beanies, but we *notice things*. When we can harness that decentralised matrix of observation, we will understand more acutely our disproportionate and damaging role in deep time.

So we need a literary culture around our surfing. What we see individually dies with us unless we share it as a body of knowledge. The revolutionary spirit in which Australians have led the world in designing equipment, in exploring coasts, in trying new approaches, needs now to aggregate into a published canon. We need to elevate the discussion, and not feel cynical about that. We need to bring in the voices that haven't been heard yet, and to

use surfing discussions to foster other, harder discussions: about activism, mental health, environmental decline, Indigeneity, gender, getting old ... about the very nature of work and play.

We need to dare to throw out the old vocabularies. We have been ably led by the first generations of surf writers in Australia, and, as this collection demonstrates, our horizons are unlimited.

Following the Birds

Madelaine Dickie

Guerrero

1.

One morning in 2014, some surfers were driving out to The Ranch—a once-secret wave on Mexico’s Guerrero coast. They passed rain-eaten concrete and a stinking mango factory. They wondered what the surf would be like. On a good day, the wave ran for nearly a kilometre, with barrel sections and a workable, whackable wall. As they approached a bridge, the driver slowed.

Up ahead, a row of dead bodies dangled by their necks.

I hear this story in my first week in Mexico and suspect I should have done better research before leaving. Sure, I’d read about the cartel bosses, fabled for feeding human hearts to their teenage employees; and the boiled bones in the country’s north, evidence of ritual cannibalism among the Xiximes; and I’d read about the cuisine, with its dizzyingly difficult names, like *chilaquiles*, and *chapulines*, and *mole* and *mezcal*. But I hadn’t bothered to check the Australian Government’s advice for Guerrero—hadn’t ‘reconsidered my need to travel’. And even if I had, the promise of exotic waves generally trumps risk. I think surf travel is a bit like following the birds.

2.

My last Sunday at home on Western Australia’s Ningaloo Reef brings conditions locally described as ‘glamour’. The wind has finally quit punishing the desert and the water off the back of the reef has turned a thrilling blue—a shade promising pelagic fish. My husband Tom and I launch the tinny at our favourite reef pass.

We leave behind the rasping throats of gullies several months dry. We leave behind the land that once cradled the most ancient

beaded necklace in the world. It's not long before we're following gannets and white terns and shearwaters. The birds' smoke-quick shadows skate the water, draw us toward the horizon. In our wake, the lines from our trolling rods dip and sway.

Then a hit! The waspish scream of the reel! The rod doubles and Tom shouts, 'Fuck, we're on! It's massive! Maybe we've foul-hooked a shark? A manta? A dolphin?'

The tinny's listing from side to side. The curses are coming thick and quick and salty. Suddenly a marlin, lit up with colours vivid as poison, streaks across the sky.

Over the next forty minutes, as Tom works the fish toward the boat to unhook it, I think about the birds—how they're a dangerous addiction. When I travel for waves, I carry the birds with me, in my brain, in my breast; they toss restless, tow me from the solid footing of land into the unknown, toward the promise of the next hook-up; perhaps a wave barrelling pink under prickly pear at dawn, or an exhibition in which violence is given form through embroidery, or a shady plaza in the mountains where an old man sees me crying and offers his hand for a dance.

My last weekend on the Ningaloo Coast is sublime. But once those wings start beating, they're impossible to ignore.

3.

I'm anxious about touching down in Mexico City alone, after four flights and over twenty-four hours without sleep. I've read of people robbed at the moneychangers inside Benito Juárez's international arrivals terminal; I've been warned of charlatans in fake taxis ready to skim the pesos from my purse, or to kidnap me. Then there are the stories of the ghost. A little girl, in Victorian-era clothing, is said to haunt the empty corridors and planes.

I think I'm more frightened of the taxi drivers, though a kidnapping might prove a challenge with my surfboards. I'm travelling with a 5'6" twin fin for soft, burglary waves, and a 6'3" step-up that I shaped myself with the help of my friend Dave.¹ I'd originally designed the step-up for windy winter mornings

at home, but I'm hoping it will also be good for Oaxaca's throaty right-hand point breaks. My rucksack's straining at the seams with fifteen books, ink pencils, an eighth of a new manuscript, three pairs of swimmers and a Spanish dictionary.

Eager to avoid hassle, I spend my first night in Mexico at the airport hotel and the following morning, I board a flight to Zihuatanejo, on Guerrero's steamy, rain-whipped coast. Guerrero is one of Mexico's poorest states. It's where forty-three young men went missing in 2014. The men were trainee teachers and had commandeered buses in the city of Iguala ahead of an annual pilgrimage to Mexico City to commemorate the Tlatelolco massacre. Hundreds of people were killed in the massacre, most of them university or high school-aged students.

In the case of Guerrero's missing forty-three, the 'missing' is a euphemism for 'murdered'. The young students never made it to Mexico City. Their buses became the target of five separate armed attacks. Two students were found dead. Walls and benches were found spattered with blood. But no-one found the forty-three young men.

Blame was initially cast on Guerreros Unidos, a local cartel alleged to have mistaken the students for members of a rival gang. The cartel was accused of burning the bodies in a rubbish tip and then disposing of the remains in a nearby river.² But forensic reports from the tip showed no signs of remains. In 2018, Mexican journalist Anabel Hernández released a meticulous investigation into the disappearance, titled *A Massacre in Mexico*.³ She writes that the case smelled so rotten, the closer you got to it, the harder it was to breathe. Despite the proximity of security bases held by municipal, state and federal police, nothing was done to stop the attacks, or to prevent the disappearance of the students. In her book, Hernández exposes a web of complicity and suggests the blame falls with former president Peña Nieto's government. She writes, 'In the midst of Mexico's polarization and loneliness, people have forgotten that the pain caused by injustice against another should also be our own pain.'

Nos faltan 43.

In the months to come, I'll see this slogan on placards, online, and in the graphic design studios of Oaxaca City. *Nos faltan 43.*

We're missing 43.

4.

I reach the coastal village of Troncones in the late afternoon. Organ pipe cacti throw cool shadows across the road. Between villas of terracotta and cream, I catch glimpses of the surf. It's glassy. In my imagination, I'm out there, feeling the water like hot silk on my arms, feeling the germs from the plane slough from my skin.

The taxi driver is a young woman who is patient with my poor verb conjugations. She tells me most of the land here is in foreign hands. Locals can't afford to buy property. Instead, they're trucked in to work as gardeners, housekeepers and cooks. I'm staying in an Airbnb that's perhaps an exception to the rule. It's owned by a Mexican surfer, Winter, a fellow goofy-footer who studied in Santa Cruz. He rents out an open-air wooden cabin, way up in the trees. It's screened from the road by flowering vines and bamboo. There's a percolator, a hammock, a writing desk and wine glasses.

I can hear the sea.

I wax up, dance around some barbed wire, then cross an empty block to the beach.

The surf looks shifty, punchy, fun. Pelicans pass by in single file, gliding in gentle S-curves just above the water. There's a blood-red burley of storm clouds around the setting sun. A story comes back to me, the one about the American surfer attacked here by a shark a few months ago.

Maybe that's why there's no-one else out.

I'm not usually frightened by stories. At least, that's what I tell myself, as I paddle into the fading light.

5.

Jet lag jostles me from under the mozzie net at two am. I pack a percolator with coffee and set up with my writing journal at the

desk. The pages stir. The truth is, I'm often frightened by stories, particularly when the stories harden into news. I was horrified to hear about the two Australian surfers murdered in Mexico in 2015.⁴ Dean Lucas and Adam Coleman were both my age, thirty-three. They were travelling by van from the Baja California Peninsula across to mainland Mexico by car ferry. Coleman was racing to Guadalajara to meet his girlfriend. Honouring the meeting time was going to involve driving all night. Mexico's highways are dangerous at night.

The men were shot by bandits.

The van they were travelling in was torched.

Why do we do it, wander the most hazardous coasts of the world in search of waves? For me, I love the rhythm of a surf trip: the intense physicality of surfing for six hours a day, eating twice a day, walking to and from the beach, feeling sunburnt, feeling bruisingly sore deep under the shoulder blades. I love having the time to refine my style. Surfing's no longer something I do thoughtlessly, or mindlessly. I'm hungry. I have goals. Along these coasts, there's the thrill in language, too. I love threading words together in a second language, love the way the most banal of transactions, like buying surf wax or fixing a blown motorbike tyre, carry an extra linguistic challenge.

On this trip, when Tom gets in for the final manic month of the three that I'm here, I want to work on my backhand tube riding. I've only ever been barrelled for a moment, not long enough to see the world properly framed by a half-moon of water.

I check my phone. It's now two forty in the morning, a nowhere hour, a nightmare hour. From somewhere close comes a low roll of thunder.

I think again of Lucas and Coleman. Of the media reports on cartel-related violence and the Netflix export *Narcos*. I wonder if things here in Mexico are really as dangerous as the foreign press would have us believe. And if they are as bad, how are contemporary Mexican artists and writers coming to terms with the poison of violence in their communities, and in their country?

The first drops of rain begin to peck at the timber roof. I refill my coffee. I know these questions, now articulated, will keep nudging me, will demand my attention in the days and months to come.

6.

Playa La Saladita, a left-hander popular with longboarders, is about half an hour from Troncones. For three consecutive years it has been the location of the Mexi Log Fest, a competition that draws surfers from all over the world. Now, one of the musclier swells of winter is set to arrive, and I'm banking on it being too big for the beginners and some of the less experienced longboarders. Sure enough, once the sets start rolling in at the four-foot mark, there's only a handful of us vying for position out the back. The walls of the waves offer spacious, smooth canvases, perfect for the swoop and glide of my new twinny. I'm working on opening up my whole body as I swing through turns, I'm spreading my arms like wings, delighted with the speed, the rhythm and the different lines the board draws.

On the biggest afternoon of the swell, I get talking between sets to an Aussie chick from Byron drifting solo through Mexico. She asks where else I've been, and I tell her Troncones. She asks if I heard about the American woman.

'Nah, nothing. What woman?'

Unlike Lucas and Coleman, the American woman was driving in broad daylight. It was nine thirty in the morning. She'd just finished a yoga class in Troncones and was taking the highway back to Playa La Saladita when a car slammed on its brakes in front of her. Four men jumped out with guns and levelled them at her windscreen. She hit the accelerator and swung a hard U-turn, almost knocking down one of the men. Then she drove until they disappeared from the rear-view mirror, until her breathing slowed and her hands stopped shaking.

This was a month or so ago.

I wonder what I would do, if I were in her shoes. Climb out, hand over the keys, start walking?

The Aussie chick tells me the highway has a reputation as a popular dumping ground for dead bodies. I imagine a kettle of black, leather-faced vultures. I suspect Guerrero is a place where following the birds doesn't always mean finding fish.

7.

The last time I saw vultures, albeit a different type, was a little under a year ago in Senegal. I was doing research for a novel about a French madame running a black magic racket. She was smuggling the penises of albinos into neighbouring Mali to be used in potions. The story was to be rapid and wicked, a nod to Denis Johnson's *The Laughing Monsters*, and peopled with musicians, expats, Chinese investors, and 'sex tourists'—retired European women with drop-dead gorgeous young Senegalese men. The albinos-for-black-magic tale is not quite as absurd as it might sound. Many years ago, when I was in Mozambique, I got yarning with a waiter whose albino brother had been dismembered for magic. In another instance, from 2018, I'd learned about a five-year-old albino girl who was ritually killed and beheaded in the Malian town of Fana.

Obviously, a lot of work needed to be done to set up a respectful framework for the story, a lot of thinking. But unfortunately, as tends to be the case when I'm drifting the coasts of the world, I ended up doing more surfing than thinking, and almost no writing at all.

One of the surf spots high on my list to visit in Senegal was N'Gor Island, famous for a right-hand wave featured in the 1966 surf classic *The Endless Summer*. I waited for a boat across the channel in the shadows of half-finished skyscrapers and wheeling black vultures. The air was dark with a blustering dust from the Sahara, and the beach doubled as a rubbish tip and sewer. Once I'd crossed the channel, settled in to a basic Airbnb, and had a few surfs on N'Gor Right, I ventured to the left-hand wave at the other end of the island. It looked good: super long, no-one surfing, the water crystal clear. I paddled out. My leg-rope dragged on my ankle, weighed down by long ribbons of rubbish. A nappy floated past. I got out the back and sat up on my board. Millions of bits of

plastic, the size of baby jellyfish, drifted around my legs.

It's a different story here in Mexico. The ocean seems healthy, teeming with schools of pelagic fish. The debris on the beaches is organic. The water is clean.

Isn't that shameful? I think. Isn't that sad?

When plastic-free water comes as a surprise, a treat, the exception and not the rule.

8.

My old friend Bina picks me up from Playa La Saladita for a mission to The Ranch. Bina's a smart, beer-loving, hard-charging Bavarian, who lives with her Mexican boyfriend in Zihuatanejo. She's quadrilingual, works as a translator, is bewitched by Guerrero and its waves, and is more saddened than fearful of the violence in her adopted country. Her preferred mode of transport is a VW bug that rattles with empty Corona bottles and wouldn't be roadworthy in most other parts of the world. Every time we slow for a *tope* or *reductor*—those ubiquitous Mexican speed bumps—the car conks out and she has to kick it in the guts to get it going again.

Years ago, we surfed together under a full moon at Pavones in Costa Rica. I caught a bomb: I remember taking off purely by feel and then just standing there, blindly, letting my fingers skim moon shadow. I rode it all the way to the fishermen's shacks at the end of the beach, where I was slammed among rolling tree logs and a cascade of cobblestones. When I got to my feet, my knees were covered in blood, and I was shaking with so much adrenaline I could barely walk.

We reminisce on that night as we head down a rat maze of unmarked dirt tracks toward The Ranch. This morning, there are no bodies swinging dead from any of the bridges, no roadblocks or men with guns.

As we near the surf, Bina tells me about another wave nearby, a big, nacho-chip left-right peak in front of a gated community called Rancho Palo Alto. You need to know the combination of the lock to get in, or someone who's got a house there. Or you need to

buy land. The community's listed on International Surf Properties and the sales pitch boasts exclusivity and a way to escape reality through '... ownership and easy access to amazing surf ...' It also champions socially responsible development through '... putting the locals to work ...'⁵

'Putting the locals to work' is an unfortunate choice of words but the other thing that doesn't sit well with me is the idea of 'ownership' of a surf spot. At home, I don't need to be wealthy or privileged to access a wave. I don't need a key, permission, or to pay someone to go for a surf.

In any case, the VW bumps its way down a sandy track without bogging and we get a look at the once-secret left-hander that is The Ranch. Long, groomed lines peel down a kilometre-long reef. It's busy; maybe thirty people. And it's pumping. If I'd actually paused to watch a proper set, I would have been anxious on the paddle out and perhaps would have opted for my bigger board. But as usual, I'm in a rush, with no time for stretching, barely time for sunscreen, too busy imagining my first, swooping turn.

Six hours in the surf, six margaritas and six tacos later, I'm not feeling very well. That night, all night, I'm violently crook at half-hour intervals. The next morning's a travel day and I'm worried I'll shit myself either in the taxi, at the airport or on the plane. It wouldn't be the first time. I pack a few pairs of emergency undies in my handbag and wrap a jumper around my waist, just in case.

As I wait for the flight out of Zihuatanejo, with bacteria backflipping in my belly and brain, I think about the history of this beautiful and troubled state—the stories about shark attacks, and tourists inadvertently glancing the edges of cartel violence, and the fact that many local people live with a sense of constant, simmering caution. I think about how the birds piqued my curiosity and drew me right to the horizon's edge, until I pulled myself away, pulled myself to solid ground.

I feel as though I've gotten off lightly.

I can't wait to go back.