Don't You Know You've Got Legs - A Gold Coast Surf Culture Manifesto

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Don’t you know you’ve got legs?
A Gold Coast Surf Culture Manifesto

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The Gold Coast and surfing are synonymous, no-one would argue much against that—a connection embedded right there in the name, the Gold Coast, fifty-seven kilometres of glowing white sand coastline rimmed along the strip with resort style high rises and an urban sprawl stretching back to the sub-tropical rainforest. With three hundred days of sunshine on average a year, the Gold Coast's list of A1 surfing related box ticks is long. Home to a key event on the World Surf League Championship Tour, the soon to be renamed Quiksilver Pro, the city has produced more surfing world champions and legends than anywhere else in the country, in groundswells of different coated brilliance, from the renegades, to the 'Bronzed Aussies', to the multi generation 'Coolie Kids' to the ambassadors. Household names which roll off the tongue: Michael Peterson, Pete Townend, Wayne 'Rabbit' Bartholomew, Mick Fanning, Joel Parkinson and seven-time World Champ Stephanie Gilmore to name a few. The offices of *Surfing Life*, Australia's most iconic surfing magazine, were housed in the Old Burleigh Theatre Arcade overlooking one of the city's most prized beach breaks. Big three surfing company Billabong was born here and new wave boutique offerings such as Rhythm are carving out a new generation slice. In some ways, the Gold Coast Superbank, a man-made surf break pumping the longest continuous wave ride in the world from Snapper Rocks to Kirra, has driven the acceleration. You can feel it in the streets, the strange duality of being in the sixth largest city in Australia still overrun by shirtless or rashy-clad surfers, grommets, salt dogs—boards under their arms, riding bikes, running lights, gliding by on skateboards or jumping fences bare foot to get to the sea. It's there in the surf worshipping architecture, high-rises called Surfers Hawaiian, Bahia and The Breakers (in the old era), now super sleek towers branded Oracle, Spirit and Soul to fit the new millennium mood—

the semiotics of surfing selling everything in this city from ice-creams to real estate to beach chic homewares. But the connection between surfing and the Gold Coast writ large has not always been easy or recognised for what it is.

And it is not just because that resistance has come from external forces, the lack of cultural recognition slung around for decades about the GC like so much B-grade journalism confetti; the resistance also has a history of coming from within—not only from policy makers and officials who failed to recognise surfing's enormous economic and cultural potential but from those who have held, and in some cases continue to hold, status and power in the scene itself.

In the paragraphs that unfold here I'll attempt to unravel the intricate webs, the complex tissue of stories and codes which drive surf culture on the Gold Coast and how one cannot be read without some understanding of the other. They are of a piece. To map this story it will be necessary for me to go back, to mine my own experience, to interview players big and small, to notice the surf culture unfurling all around me with new eyes, to wonder why I got so close to surfing culture but never took it up, to see how my writing career has been infused and affected by what some people, and I, might have even referred at some point as just a bunch of skegs. The whole process has been intimidating and maddening but most of all illuminating. The web has revealed itself.

In one of the most biodiverse regions in the world, the Gold Coast is a complex ecosystem that very rapidly turned from a genteel holiday spot for the Brisbane elite when Governor Sir Anthony Musgrave built a seaside retreat for himself and his entourage in 1890s in Southport, to a national playground in the mid to late twentieth century, to the *Miami Vice* version of Gotham City or Vegas or wherever else, real or imagined, we see today. In the stairwell to the Surf World Gold Coast museum in Currumbin a large plaque rests as if declaring a manifesto: 'The clique became a cult and the cult became a culture.' The same could be said of the city.

When I lived in Mermaid Beach in the mid 2000s the local council erected a near six-foot steel fence straight down the middle of the Gold Coast highway running the length of the strip dividing the suburban sprawl from the coveted beachside. It was designed to be very difficult to jump, at an awkward height, the skinny median strip running perilously close to cars, the whole feat even harder with a board. The council wanted us all to cross at the lights. It was about our safety, they said, the four-lane highway, a Frogger game for surfers, skaters and beachgoers scurrying over the asphalt, towels billowing like capes. Hitting the water was the goal, as fast as possible. Every night some sea-salt Robin Hood with a boltcutter would snap a big hole in that fence sometimes leaving part of it swinging in the wind narrowly missing traffic. The council workers would remount that section of fence, solder heavier clips and the next day the hole would appear somewhere else. The war went on. For months. And we were grateful. But then it stopped—perhaps Robin moved away—more likely he was undone by ramped-up CCTV.

For me, the connection between surf culture and the city I call home is something more than just a perfect storm of environment, critical mass and means, the linkage which erupts when you have a big city highway and a string of lit beaches running parallel—it's symbiotic. Symbiosis, by definition, meaning the interaction between two different organisms living in close physical association, typically to the advantage of both. If we think of this city as an organism and its surf culture as one too, we can see their stories have developed in tandem, they've grown up together, mirrored each other, fed on and bolstered each other's unfurling. The Viennese writer Hermann Broch once claimed that, 'Those who live by the sea can hardly form a single thought of which the sea would not be part.' Surfing runs a line through our lives here, direct, indirect, subliminal; there are points of convergence everywhere, ways which won't leave you alone even when you want them to, infused, ground in, that's how it is when you live here. The tide of these things washes over us. But I didn't always think this way.

Surfing the Grunge Soup—GC Surf Culture in the 1990s

I arrived on the Gold Coast at the tail end of a blisteringly hot January 1992. I was here to study at the freshly minted Gold Coast campus of Griffith University—in a city of perpetual new things. The degree, a Bachelor of Arts in Creative Arts, was the first of its kind in Australia—a mash-up of creative writing, visuals arts and theatre, less like *Fame* and something more like the art school version of the Gravitron—where we bit off more than we could chew and held on for dear life; a ragtag bag of arty kids come from all over, bunnies to the experiment. We'd had to audition to get in and thought that made us special. Looking back, I guess it kinda did. We pooled into cheap share houses in Labrador and Southport in our Doc Martins and black jeans, wasting no time getting high and complaining about the heat. We burrowed into these microscopic worlds in the burbs as if the rest of the city wasn't out there, sliding between the campus and other people's houses and shitty flats in a tornado of art student fumes and bias. We coveted gothic candelabras. Good grades. Each other. Experimental noise projects in front rooms happened way more than visits to the beach—which seemed to only ever happen at night, in the dark, when someone with a car could drive you there and your eyes were pinging. My skin was so white it was ghostly. The city was a supersonic wasteland of fun in the sun, so, we avoided it mostly. Or tried to. The thing was, like strands of seaweed unspooling in rivulets, the ocean and the city, in all its fairyland wonder, began creeping into the poems and stories we were writing, the art we were making, into our dreams.

If I'm honest, no matter how punk I ever tried to get, the sea was always there, rolling around inside me. It had been there since my fat baby face first felt the salty scratch of a towel on a Sydney beach. My mum, a ten-pound Pom who'd bake until she was golden and my dad, a Manly lifesaver who loved to swim out past the breakers. By the time my brother came along my father

had taken up a transfer to Brisbane, but the water never really left us, creeks, storms, suburban pools, that was just what a south-east Queensland life was: finding water and getting inside it. Weekend runs to Bribie Island or the Sunshine Coast, sometimes holidays on the GC in buildings called Seacrest or Pacific Point or The Chateau, our dad launching us onto waves as if we were pliable kid-sized dolphins. Long summer stints in Forster, New South Wales, with bronzed cousins and their entourages on One Mile Beach, where the back door of my aunty and uncle's house hit the soft shaded sand of the beach track, always cool on the toes, as if it was still holding the night inside it. If we weren't flying out the front of waves on our boogie boards, my bro and I spent a lot of our time with our feet moving around in the fishy slosh at the bottom of boats.

Once I left school, and the panopticon parental eye, I tunnelled further and further away from the sea. Not literally, I could have gotten myself on a beach within an hour or so, but in a parallel universe kind of way. The tunnels I scurried down all related to the night, dark alleyways, shaded rooms, hidden theatres, basement level recording studios. The arts and music scene in Brisbane was mushrooming and I was Alice, mooching around the underground, dying my natural blonde tresses black. I wasn't thinking about the ocean. But the sea waits: once it gets inside you, the sea always wants you back.

My life ran smack up against surfing culture again in my second year of university when the novelty of the life hadn't worn off exactly but gotten scratchy. The share houses collapsing under our rapidly developing capacity for high drama and in some cases, the creeping grip of heroin. I'd already seen where that road led to in Brisbane—nowhere good—so I bounced out and moved in with the nerdiest girl in our year closer to the Broadwater in Labrador. The move worked: my grades went from middling to straight A but I was broke and bored. I needed a job. And I got one—working for one of the biggest surfing retail franchises in the region, City Beach. My neighbour had pulled

some strings, I didn't surf, and I didn't look the part, but I guess I looked okay enough to pass—my manager seemed impressed I could write a sentence and I helped her compose her missives to head office. From the first day I stepped into that shop in the Dolphin Arcade in Surfers Paradise, it was as if I'd let out breath. The shop itself was overstocked, a surf brand money machine and mostly boring. It was the people who worked there that intrigued me. Older than the sixteen-year-olds, the owners packed the Pacific Fair store with, this crew were in their early to mid-twenties, surfers and skaters who walked the walk and looked like a GC version of a Californian dream. The girls, megawatt: bright eyes, exposed midriffs—all long hair, platform sneakers, health. I couldn't talk to them about Lacan and that was part of the attraction. And the boys, ultra-cool, so laidback they we're always staring off into space as if dreaming of something they'd never tell you about. Uniform of knee-length quick dries, boxy surf and band shirts, skate shoes, Etnies, Globes, DCs, bright white socks to mid-calf, Arnette sunglasses, chunky silver chains running from their belts to their pockets.

Maybe fantasising about each other in that surf shop was inevitable, the long hours stuck in a cheap wood panelled tomb, with the same surf videos playing on high rotation and the stereo wars erupting when we all got sick of watching big wave dominations over and over, and selling Quiksilver t-shirts in fifty bag lots to Chinese tourists—the war usually went—me and all the guys playing punk, Unwritten Law, Deftones, NOFX vs all the girls playing 'Barbie Girl' by Aqua—and who wouldn't want to party when you looked like that? We'd close out shifts at The Rose & Crown, a sticky glorious shithole that catered to broad cross-section of misfits, basically anyone who couldn't stand the Cocktails and Dreams style clubs on Orchid Avenue and one of the few places in the strip where you could hear live bands. A scene ripe for the picking.

The Rose & Crown

(Writing a poem by asking people in the Rosie what their three favourite things in the world are and writing it down on beer coasters)

beer, girl, money
Canada, horses, dogs
lights, blue, green
sex, drugs, girls

money, fun, happiness
sharing my dreams and helping other people get there,
spreading good karma

women, money, beach
you, travelling, surfing
life, girlfriend, pot
drinking, drugs, women
dog, surfboard, sex

asparagus sandwiches, lesbians and Aussie Rules

rum, big cars, big waves
surfing, rum, sex
rum, pot, friends
chocolate, sex, friends
friends, family, sex

a tip truck full of beer, a tip truck full of money and a lifetime full of happiness

alcohol, sex, music
alcohol, g-strings, cleavage
alcohol, drugs, girls,
alcohol, football, sex

alcohol, music, females and surfing in the morning
(can I have four?)

my car, money and I dunno gee that's hard
my car, my mum and other people's money
my son, sex and beautiful clothes
my son, drugs and manly hot bodies
my son, country music and my 1979 fenda telecaster

e, surf, sex
mul, speed, e
sex, you, the rosie
her, beer, the rosie

sex, travelling boys
cocksucking cowboys, Bacardi lemon and lime,
vodka lima and soda

surfing, sex, chilling
career, stability, travelling
music, generational diversity and that's it
chocolate, Matchbox 20 and Brad Pitt

girlfriend, surfing, making money
boyfriend, mull, good times
alcohol, motorbikes and living in the bush without a hassle in the world

The ocean, the air in my lungs and the Vatican
(you know where the Pope lives)

That's the thing about this world, it was predictable on so many levels until it wasn't. The booze, babes and bulbs mentality shot through with an electric line of wit, eccentricity, gen X culture.

A dropout slacker philosophy that had morphed into an off the grid, non-conformist ideal, keeping it real and pure or mad and sick—and a lot of that vibe led back to surfing.

I went to the bars and the parties, but I didn't go bake on the beach. I'd still had to write and study when my lifestyle diversions allowed it. I moved to Main Beach where the crew from the shop and their people hung out (I'd never live further than the Southport bridge—they'd tell me, eyes bulging—as if living away from a beach break was akin to the end of the world). I settled in and the surf scene was a tonic, got me through all the deconstruction, the intense competitiveness of my peers, the pressure of trying to be someone better than I was. I needed somewhere chill to escape to and three beers deep in a house full of surfers and skaters was never a bad place to be.

Waves of Mutilation—Boys, Bongs and the End of an Era

Back then, Main Beach was different: you could still smell the money, the perfumed waft of the white-shoe brigade, but there was also run-off, detritus, flotsam and jetsam and enough crumbling old beach shacks, cheapish apartments and two storey walk-ups to house us—the beach houses set back from the road, on giant blocks, rats scurrying in the sandy soil under wind-bitten decks. Tedder Avenue was pumping—during the day it was stacked with shirtless surfers, shocks of sun-bleached hair and six packs gleaming like rows of oversized toasted hazelnuts, pooling outside the infamous local bakery, wolfing down vanilla slices and jam donuts. It was always hard to get a seat. When a Goldsteins franchise appeared across the road, the well-heeled tended to go there instead, maybe it was for the comfort of the branding that went better with their pastel-coloured Polo Ralph Lauren shirts; more likely it was to avoid, as best they could, the rowdy banter of the unfiltered directly opposite. At night bars like Blu Grotto

catered to the rising techno tide and a rollcall of hot young women with tabs of e shoved into their fuck-me boots while the old guard faded into their chardonnays on the al fresco tables in the better restaurants. At night the worlds often merged—especially in the long dark alleyway running behind the restaurants and bars where all the action was, apprentice chefs smoking and selling next to the empty kegs, suited entrepreneurs ranting into their mobile phones, girls trying to sneak their way into something for free, until the pavements got wobbly, the fairy lights in the palm trees blurry, and you found yourself in the high-rise apartment of a Gold Coast entrepreneur i.e. con man drinking his top-shelf scotch trying to avoid his clutches or a middle-aged camp dude decked out in Versace who'd once done interior decoration for Elton John—his apartment taking up a whole floor of a high-rise replete with mosaic mirrored walls and life-size ceramic black panthers. The rich might have had all the cash—but we looked good.

Today Main Beach glistens like a shiny super yacht with no-one on it. Impressive, but eerily quiet as if it's forgotten about the fuller throttle speed it was made for. Polished new-edition Mercedes-Benzes and Porsche SUVs gliding into gated grounds, fortress towers, where no-one ever appears on the verandas, as if the people inside are too brittle and fragile for actual wind. The only houses left, *Vogue Living* sprawls with imposing garage doors and security cameras swivelling. Driving along Tedder Avenue, it's as if everyone has died or is about to. The well-coiffed couples alighting gingerly out of the soft-close doors of their chariots to buy gourmet dog food for their Chihuahuas and Shih Tzus have priced their suburb out of a personality. The median rent price three times the minimum wage and the shops along the avenue closing at a rate of knots. A foreshadowing of the kind of real estate squeeze that's slowly making its way down the coast, through all the other beachside precincts, a relentless development push, the pursuit of what the CSIRO has called the Gold Coast's 'path dependence',[1] a track set in the Wild West development era of the 50s through to the 80s, when standard development practices were

ignored by a renegade council and everything got rubber stamped. A place where the continued levelling of 'old' structures does more than usher in the latest shiniest aesthetic, it effectively eliminates the presence of the working class.

It's hard to believe Mainy was once cool, with one of the best video stores on the coast. The tiny flat I lived in at the front end of a two-storey walk-up on Breaker Street is miraculously still there, one of the last remaining, flanked on either side by houses with surfaces that never corrode or die. That little set of rooms where I once woke to a stranger sitting on my couch at one am tripping off his head. The place where I rewrote my honours thesis on a fridge-sized PC so one of my surf shop colleagues didn't get divorced because of all the stories I'd written about her, even though she did anyway, the pad where an old uni friend arrived one night to try and beat me up, and the Indy 500 used to rip through the streets—corralling us in a lockdown storm of petrol and parties. Tripping between one beach shack and the next was kind of a Main Beach thing, treats in hand. Sublime, the musical weapon of choice—a Californian ska punk outfit who seemed to embody the mood of the times, their tunes a mash-up of Cali Caribbean nights, dirty boulevards and bad tattoos rolling out of every house and low-rise apartment. 'Got to find a reason, reason things went wrong, got to find a reason why my money's all gone.'[2] The journey between the houses often more adventurous than the reality where I'd often get bored in five minutes, with all the boys going on, like boys tend to do.

To amuse myself I developed a series of lo-fi crushes on a Bermuda Triangle of said boys. There was Jake, an American surfer whose impenetrability and detachment hung around him like a layer of very sexy ozone; Mark, a punk skater with enough chain, nose ring and Billy Idol hair to scare old ladies; and Wraith, the ringleader of the druggiest, funniest house beachside of anywhere, peopled with Wraith's army, a just-graduated gaggle of grommets, their puppies-in-a-bag energy infectious. Wraith was a surfer and a bodybuilder whose width seem designed to make up for the

fact that he was no Valentino. He made all the girls laugh mostly because they wouldn't sleep with him. But I liked him, sneaking into his house late at night, stepping over passed-out blondies, to his room which was off limits to everyone, apparently.

Mark was more like a buddy where the crush is best left unrequited, we rolled around once and then thought better of it. I'd trail around him in the streets after our shifts watching him olly and grind on anything with an edge, laughing at his antics. Mark was in love with Alyssa anyway, a statuesque peroxided warrior who wore tartan skirts and steel caps. When she walked towards me everything seemed to slow down, my body going into flight mode, but she was actually very sweet.

Jake was another story. Hanging around with him in the back end of the surf shop while he punched anti-theft tags into mountains of stock does not sound like the most romantic of bonding sessions but somehow it was—Jake always made you feel as if you were in a much sadder version of a John Hughes movie, sunglasses-at-night vibe, lots of long meaningful pauses. I don't know, maybe it was the accent. I remember bittersweet times after late-night calls, lying awake in his bed. He was going back to California, nothing ever got started or had a chance to, or maybe I was reading too much into it like they all said—as poets tend to do.

The vibe in surfing at the time was hyper-masculine—or at least that's how it seemed to me. Boys who were so pumped up and self-assured on the videos and in the cheeky banter thrown around at parties, but they tended to unravel or startle easily—at least for a few moments. There was so much bravado, and inside that, a community, but as my time spent amongst them all stretched out, a strong whiff of same same washed over everything. Rampant self-medication, perhaps even desperation. It was partly the times. I wondered about those boys. How many of them had thought about throwing themselves off of high-rises or into the sea and never coming out? It was a feverish scene and we were all in it. My uni friends mostly didn't understand me 'slumming it' as they put it and I kept the two worlds separate but there was something

sad about Jake and there was something sad about Wraith. I never realised part of that sadness might have been about me. I was a chameleon changing my colours to suit the different trees.

In May 1996 Sublime frontman Bradley Nowell OD'd in a San Francisco hotel room and maybe we should have taken it as an omen.

Like all worlds that get appropriated and sold, the scenes on the televisions and in the magazines were not quite representative of what it was. I've been in other big game worlds where it felt the same. Different sport codes, the music industry. There was always a big gap between the rider and the reality. But big game and big talk sells merch and when there's money to be made no-one wants to talk about the pressures that go with competition outside the norm, a bit of ribbing and one-upmanship par for the course. No-one wants to talk about the kickback from the lifestyle, not when the lifestyle can be shot in the right light. At least they didn't back then.

When I asked surf writer and previous *Tracks* editor Tim Baker whether they had ever run any articles on substance abuse or depression, and he said not that I can recall, I found that strange on one level and predictable on another. The remit of *Tracks* wasn't about analysis—it was all about big wave panoramas and a blokey, conversational vibe that celebrated surfing and fought in some ways against is denigration. But still. This was exactly the time when a whole generation of surfers on the Gold Coast got dragged across the reefs of a scene and left out there. Alone. There was no magic jetski come to scoop them up. A see no evil, hear no evil state of affairs that had been lingering for a while.

In 2019 surfing legend Mark 'Occy' Occhilupo opened up about his struggles with depression and substance abuse when he was at his peak in the 1980s. 'Back then, mental health wasn't talked about. You kind of felt like whatever you were experiencing was only happening to you. There weren't really any ways to talk to other people … it was kind of weak to be going through something like that. You didn't talk about it. You tried to keep a handle on

it yourself.'[3] Occy clawed his way out, reigniting his drive and channelling the traits of his addictive personality into a remarkable comeback that would see him place second to Kelly Slater in 1998 and take out the world title in 1999. But others weren't so lucky. Tim told me, 'The write-off mentality in Australian surfing was in full flight in the eighties and nineties and a full generation of Gold Coast surfers failed to live up to their potential.' Guys that could have been contenders invisible in the thirty-year gap between Rabbit winning the first World Title in 78 and Mick Fanning in 2007. They all lounge around in there nursing their penalty bongs. 'Mick, Joel and Dean saw the casualties,' he told me, 'and were determined to chase their dreams.'

Just A Girl—Surfing Culture, Invisible Women and the Quest to be Seen and Heard

Twenty odd years later I'm teaching creative writing at the university which sprouted me and have been in different stints since I graduated. Watching the campus grow from a four-building corral with a pop-up cafeteria in a classroom serving cans of cheap soft drink and lukewarm sausage rolls into a mini-city so big it now has its own postcode. The students have come in waves too, the internationals mostly from colder places—Norway, Sweden, Canada—drawn in by heat-seeking romance, the drone shots of a city rimmed in sunshine and water which the university blasts all over its overseas advertising and digital signatures. When I first started teaching, the local kids would rock up to tutes with twenty minutes to go, wet hair, unmistakable post-session glow—shoulders loose, sun soaked, taking their seat like everything was right with the world, until I'd raise an eyebrow and they'd say, 'Sorry I'm late miss,' and I'd counter, 'Surf must be good today—and don't call me miss.' They'd shrug and go red maybe, but the grin would say all I needed to know.

One of the worst offenders was Zita. An edgy young woman from outback Queensland who'd landed on the coast and taken up surfing with the same kind of attitude she did everything—full tilt. Keeping control of a class was always difficult when Zita was around. She didn't look like a GC girl. Body taut and wiry from a mix of surfing and recreationals, her clothes were more rockstar than Roxy and her platinum hair, short at the back and rising in rockabilly style quiff up top, meant she looked as if she's just stepped off the set of a No Doubt film clip. She was also whip smart but her ADHD tendencies and her dependency on nicotine and weed meant she was always heading outside for a hit. Small clumps of boys would follow on the pretence of needing to go to the toilet, answer a call from work, whatever. Often, I'd join them after class declining the toke and trying to connect to Zita—to get her to focus, I knew she was one of the best writers I had, but the task proved difficult. There were layers to Zita I hadn't fully cottoned onto yet, a traumatic family history and a taste for the unruly, so I'd just sit there answering her looping questions as best I could, enjoying basking in her energy, her intelligence, her command, watching the boys preening about like peacocks trying to get her attention. It never worked.

Zita tunnelled much further into the rabbit holes of the Gold Coast surfing scene than I did. After she graduated, I didn't see her for a while, maybe the occasional phone call, always funny, but underneath, this low-level hum line of static, as if she might need rescuing. Zita lived on what locals call the south coast of the Goldy, the surf scene playing out all down the strip but peaking at prized points, from those who surf South Straddy in the north and those who hang on the long stretch of coast running from Currumbin to Kirra and Coolangatta on the New South Wales border in the south. I'd heard she was running in a few different circles and that she'd struck up a friendship with a big personality in the scene. I remember once she'd just gotten back from the Bells Contest at Torquay full of stories of all the crazy shit that went down—she never seemed that impressed with the boys or the

groupies who congealed around them and that's partly why she was in. Zita wasn't a girl that got a backstage pass when the party was swinging, she was surfing and getting high and staying in the houses. The free rein must have been seductive.

The curious thing about this story, is that when it comes to Zita's interactions, I can't name names and that says something about how the hierarchies of this local scene work. We spend over two hours talking online about her surfing life and a big chunk of it remains off the record. Zita knows things. She's seen what it's like to be considered one of the boys, and what it feels like when you're not, always stuck somewhere in between, she wasn't pro, she wasn't lineage, she was scrapping for everything she ever learned. And always this idea that maybe if she was magically good enough it would prove her own self-worth, she'd be accepted, the gates would open up to a kind of mythical surfing nirvana that was actually all in her head.

Zita conveys the story to me cleanly. The guy she'd been hanging out with had become known as a wastoid; his name, whenever I mention it to other players, is met with rolls of the eyes, dismissiveness, even though he'd apparently been troubled but brilliant. I'd felt the kickback too, in a peripheral way. How some people generate unease in a community because they rock the boat when there's reputations to protect and money to be made. Zita liked this guy because he was what you might call an outsider-insider, someone she could relate to. She soon learnt that aligning yourself or considering yourself a friend might be met with resistance.

'The first time I realised very clearly there was a social code, hierarchy and standard that I would never measure up to in the very inner circles of surfing on the Gold Coast, was when I happened to pass the wife of a well-known professional surfer, who, I knew through social circles. I said hello and I innocently suggested, "Oh we should go walking since you live down the road, there's some good hills around here."

'I remember the look on her face. Indignant, disgusted,

as if I'd stepped on the Queen's corgi or flashed a penis from a trench coat. She replied curtly, her words cooling the air, "No, I don't think so, I don't have time." To me that was a clear tipping point, when a number of other experiences had culminated in an intuitive understanding. The Gold Coast had spawned a currency system that I clearly was not able to offer anything to. I was neither beautiful enough in the sense that I was I able to be coveted, I had no status, I had no partner with status or money, I was just your normal run of the mill girl with no other will or energy to feign otherwise, my youth, along with my naivety, having passed a few summers before. Nor was I young enough to be exploited for anything. I was not even afforded congeniality or a sign of respect. I was dirt.'

Zita tells me she had been operating under the illusion she was part of a community, but status overran everything, status was all important.

Zita spends a lot of time with her father now, but it wasn't always like that. Zita's family lineage is fraught with trauma and abuse, so many members of her family on both sides failed by systems and institutions and the ricochet effects of their suffering pealed through generations. I often picture Zita's early life as some kind of kid version of *Wake in Fright*. I see her on the balcony of an outback pub in Queensland where something very real and very fucking raw is about to happen. She was a kid on the edge. And there were so many people in the local community here on the edge too. Surfing in that sense wasn't necessarily a panacea.

Zita got very sick. She told me at one stage when she hit rock bottom, she had hardly had any movement left, her body was on fire. She healed herself with bone broths, integrative medicine, trauma therapy, surfing. Crucially, her relationship with the ocean had shifted from a scene-based interaction into a more embodied, essential experience. She'd had to adjust her thinking and it's a mode of engagement a lot of surfers I interviewed for this story have. The will to be better, but not necessarily to do that in view of others or a camera. To get better and excel for yourself. Surfing

is a sport where you can graduate on your own terms. The thing is Zita, had felt much more pressure as a woman to belong—to be accepted, to have felicity out there, and in the end that desire, had partly resulted in her not being able to move her limbs at all.

When I arrive at her townhouse in Kingscliff maybe circa 2005, I've got two bottles of wine in hand, but I'll only need one, because well, I'm hanging out with Zita. She's slow-cooking us some lamb and tells me about her journey, trying to figure out what has been wrong with her when no doctor could. What I distinctly remember about this night is Zita raving on to me at some point about surfing magazines, how they exemplify something fucked about surfing culture she hasn't been able express or penetrate despite all her experience and education. She shows me a series of very hot shots of a young Stephanie Gilmore not surfing but posing in her bedroom in black and white, in her underpants. Stephanie has since, rightly pushed back on this type of objectivation, but for someone into sport like I was, I found the images highly sexualised in a way that was uncomfortable—from the photos you can't even recognise what kind of sport she does. Not that surprising in surfing maybe but weird as a woman operating in the twenty-first century. Why did it take so long for the surfing world to catch up? Why were women shot in these ways and so removed from their obvious ability? Why was it so threatening? This was before #MeToo, before the NRL and AFL codes finally recognised the groundswell in women's participation, before prize money in most codes was on parity. As women, this was our reality.

It reminded me of the days in the surf shop when I'd flip through the pages of those magazines on the counter and random people's coffee tables feeling uninspired and unimpressed. I was used to doing this—a detached default mechanism is often necessary as a woman, when nothing in the pages connects you to the content. It wasn't just because I couldn't necessarily read the aesthetics of a good set or the particulars of some guy busting a good air, it was because I couldn't see myself there. I wasn't there. There weren't any women present.

More recently I picked up an edition of *Tracks* thinking surely in twenty-odd years there'd been some progression. I go through it cover to cover. There are no articles on women surfers. There are no articles written by women. The only picture of a woman in the whole magazine is in an advertisement for wetsuits designed to appeal to those with a rising environmental consciousness. You can't see her face. It is what Zita would call a money shot, board under her arm in a high-cut rashy, the shot emphasising not her surfing ability or even her face, but her pert ass.

I remember some of the guys in the surf shop would rib me about why I didn't surf, trying to teach me how to ride a skateboard in the wide bowels of the arcade when it was quiet. I'd tell them, 'Jesus, man get off my case, I bodysurf, I boogie board.'

And they'd say, 'Why? Don't you know you've got legs?'

The comment didn't sting so much as make me wonder myself. Why hadn't I stood up?

There had been pioneering women in surfing from the Gold Coast or who have lived here, Phillis O'Donnel, Wendy Botha—but I didn't know about them then. None of the guys I'd interviewed for this story thought the marginalisation of women in surfing was a real and deliberate thing, more a consequence of larger factors but I guess that's the different between observing women and being one.

Gangster's Paradise—Views from the Inside

I'm standing behind the counter of my local BWS, notebook resting on a stack of shopping bags on the top of a stand with all the implements one might need to get stuck right into a bottle of booze hanging off it, shot measures, corkscrews, bottle openers and stoppers, cocktail shakers, plastic cups, party hats. I'm not working here but the roll call of characters filing into the shop think I am—asking how's business and depending on how gone

they already are, sharing mini-life stories, slurred commentaries to which Mike and I, the real bottle shop guy, feign various levels of interest. I'm here to interview him and as he bags up stock and deals with French backpackers who want bottles of Mateus, and wired locals who want the cheapest cigarettes, he tells me about his surfing life. Bottle shops in Australia have been declared an essential service in peak Corona, but the going's pretty slow, so we're able to talk freely.

We start with the shark attack because, well, Jesus. He says, 'Remember when that guy nearly got taken by a shark at Lennox Head in twenty fifteen?' I nod recalling a wave of attacks around that time, all on the stretch of coast from Byron Bay through to Ballina and Lennox. Sadly, some of them were fatal. Mike says, 'Yeah, that was me.'

Mike was on his annual family holiday in Lennox about an hour and a half south of the Gold Coast on the northern New South Wales coast. He was out surfing with his brother, it was the day after a young guy had been taken at North Wall in Ballina. There was media everywhere and they were all a bit paranoid about going out, so they went in a little later than usual, and when Mike pulled away from the main group the shark launched.

'All of a sudden it was as if my surfboard hit a rock or something.' He smashes his hands together to try and mimic the impact. 'So, it's gone (his board) from a fairly flat position to a fairly vertical position. The shark's come along and grabbed the back of the surfboard and given it a bit of a shake. I've flopped into the water and all I recall is grabbing my board as quick as possible and luckily a wave came along and smashed into me, I smashed into somebody else trying to get out of the water.' He laughs when he says this, but I can tell how mad the scramble must have been. The very real panic of it is still in his eyes, in his muscle memory. Mike got to the beach. He tells me he just sat there for second in shock. There were big holes in his board and the shark had eaten one fin and he remembers turning his surfboard over because he didn't want people to see. When I ask him why, he says he didn't want

the attention, didn't want the media all over him, but they came anyway.

'My brother was still in the water and I thought, gee I better get him out of there,' and we laugh at this like the delayed reaction is justified, normal. 'Anyway in the time it took me to get from the point to our holiday house a distance of a few hundred metres the media swarmed on us, someone had called it in … and my brother was pushing the media into me if you like, and you know, I wasn't into it at all. I'd just had this horrendous experience; I didn't need more horrendous experiences like going on national television.'

This is just the type of self-effacing guy Mike is. In all my interactions with him, some of them definitely more inebriated than others, he's what you'd call a true gentleman. We now greet each other like long-lost friends every time I enter the shop, it's kind of our thing and my mates are always amused by this—that the crew from the bottle shop are friends with me and come to my new year's parties. But the local scene in Surfers Paradise, one of the country's most frequented tourism hot spots, is like this: in a city which can be overrun by over eighty thousand visitors a day, local price and local rules is a thing.

When I ask Mike who his favourite local surfer is, he doesn't hesitate. 'I'd have to say Mick would be a favourite—more his personality than anything. I met him in Bali once, we were out in the surf, we were at this secret spot, it was him and Mason Ho and they were shooting for Red Bull, we're in the water and there only three or four of us there and the camera crew. And I mentioned the shark attack thing, his happened about two weeks after mine and we were in the same article in *LiQUiFY*. We had a little personal moment if you like because we'd had that same experience. He's always worried about something coming from behind him and I'm always looking at the shadows. It took me a couple of weeks to get back in the water and when I did get back in, I used to hallucinate sharks and that lasted for quite a while.'

Mike's written a list of other things he wants to talk to me about on the back of a receipt. I can't read his writing all that well, but I

can see one item, the difference between the old scene and the new scene and next to that in brackets is one word—pot.

'Kelly Slater was the great game changer. Back in the old days we had people like Michael Peterson with mental issues who used to use illicit drugs to self-medicate. And those people unwittingly influenced a lot of other young surfers.' Mike tells me stories about surf trips in Sri Lanka and Sumatra when he was young, with groups of guys he'd 'trapped himself with' who'd get so blazed they'd miss out on the best surf in the morning. He said Kelly Slater changed it for everyone, he'd had a dad who was an alcoholic and was openly against drugs and drinking. Mike says Kelly gave him an out. 'I wasn't really into drugs, I'm just in for the surfing, and if Kelly could say no anyone could.'

A lot has changed on the Gold Coast in that same stretch of time too. When I tell people I live in Surfers Paradise they tend to look at me as if as an alien life force has kidnapped me and forced me to do it. 'What about the bikies,' they ask? 'What about all the schoolies?' In the twenty-odd years I have lived on the Gold Coast I have never met a bikie. The only gangsters I've met have been government officials, businessmen and low-grade drug dealers who wish they were gangsters but who are actually just foot soldiers for syndicates that operate underground everywhere, not just here. When it comes to Schoolies, I've never had any overt moral panics about the sorties of rebellious youth. In fact, when they descend in their tens of thousands into my suburb for two weeks every year, I kinda like it, the high-rises turning into rampant spectacles of noise, colour and light, white curtains billowing out of open doors as if all the buildings are going to take off and fly, all the kids corralled in a giant cage on the beach, dancing around in the sand and the lasers they train all over them and out across the sea, having the kind of fun most of us have forgotten how to. It's as if everyone has erased the idea of why all these buildings are here in the first place, why the majority of schoolies continue to come here even though dribs and drabs of them might take off to Byron or Port Douglas

or Bali. It's because of the unique big-city, big-ocean mix of experiences this place offers. Protecting the precarity of that mix though is going to be the problem.

In promotional footage of the Gold Coast, the city appears to explode out of the sand and its intricate man-made canal systems in a heady, high-density fusion of development, beach and water that defies logic. And in fact, it does. 'Looking at Chicago's gold coast, Spain's Costa del Sol, Mexico's Baja peninsula and Florida's Fort Lauderdale, we can see a type of urban development that is irrevocably dependent upon exploitation of waterside natural environments for hedonistic pleasure, tourism, land and property development, and conspicuous consumption. Particular environmental imaginaries have made such places "golden" in the eyes of their developers, visitors and residents. The environmental problems facing these and other "gold coasts" stem from similar historical patterns of urban development, which have concentrated wealth in risky places (prone to earthquakes, tsunamis, hurricanes, flooding and/or landslides) and failed to recognise the value of local ecosystems. Urban environmental histories of gold coasts can illuminate how these places interact with the ecological processes that have shaped them.'[4]

It's hard to believe but the GC 'once faced south not east and was situated near the current position of Antarctica. Hundreds of millions of years ago it lay at the bottom of an abyssal trench, off the coast of the super continent Gondwana.'[5] The idea of the Gold Coast starting off as a stretch of land languishing at the bottom of an abyss lends itself to classic jokes, images of a whole bunch of metre-maid mermaids squirming around down there just waiting for their chance. The city has never lacked detractors. All the shade thrown has done zip to dent its unremitting status as the fastest-growing city in the country for over twenty years, the number one holiday destination for domestic tourists and top five for internationals. All this unrelenting growth, though, comes at a price.

In 2013 the Gold Coast City Council spent $20,000 a day of taxpayer money on foreshore protection and beach restoration after

a particularly bad season of erosion—i.e. protecting multimillion-dollar properties from falling into the sea. 'As a result of coastal development on the Gold Coast very little functioning foredune habitat remains with the exception of the Southport Spit and South Stradbroke Island.'[6] And where does controversial Gold Coast Mayor Tom Tate want to build his giant cruise ship terminal and enact his latest public land grab? The Southport Spit. A perfect storm is brewing. Tuned to a fever pitch, a war is erupting between volunteer organisation Save Our Spit, the officials elected in one of the safest liberal seats in the country and a Labor State Government who appears for the moment, to be on the side of SOS and the activist surfers and locals like Mike, who are heavily involved in it who've lived here long enough to recognise the precarious beauty of an environment we're potentially about to lose.

There is no doubt the Gold Coast was built on the income and flow-on effects of natural resource depletion, particularly sand mining and forestry. Black gold in the form of rutile and zircon used to make ammunitions when war time demand was high and red gold in the form of cedar which drove the burgeoning economies of many coastal cities in this state. But how long can this disconnect between the economy and the environment continue? Early twentieth century images of the Gold Coast show a foredune landscape completely flattened by sand mining—a process favoured by government because it paved the way, literally, for development. It is in some respects the reason why we're all here.

I live in one of those high-rises that rose out of the sand in Surfers Paradise, not a shiny new one but an older-style place. The unbroken view of the Pacific Ocean it offers running from Main Beach to Coolangatta on a clear day is breathtaking. The sun rising off the horizon each morning like a supernova of neon orange nuclear fallout means I spend most of my time walking around my pad with my sunglasses on. As the years have gone by, I've learned to read this panorama in a multitude of ways—from up high, with my toes in the sand or my body in the waves—and it has infused the way I write and see. You become attuned to tidal

shifts, wind variations, dangerous rips, when the breaching of a humpback whale is going to make you spill your breakfast, what times of day the rainbow lorikeets will arrive on your balcony in a chaos of colour and carnage and when the currawongs will signal the loneliness of a long night. Mostly, I've learned of all the different ways the ocean speaks. From calm and benevolent to full of untempered ferocity.

It's a vista I particularly enjoy after two am, when I'm up late writing and the rickshaws pumping Justin Bieber or Tones and I have slowed down, when the Lamborghinis and the Harley Davidsons have stopped doing laps, when all the party people are locked down in the clubs or the bowels of the casino and the pissed bogans wandering the streets have gone back to their package-deal apartments. I live on the only stretch of beach in the city lit up 24/7 by huge banks of full voltage floodlights. Usually a beach at night is a deep dark place flecked only by a full moon or distant shore lights catching rolling lips of whitewash, but Surfers Paradise beach is dark only at the north and south edges where the floodlights no longer reach. Out the front of my place the Esplanade glows, and the glow stretches from the sand into the sea. The thousands of seagulls that populate this area don't seem to mind, in fact they appear to prefer it, the lights raising food sources in the sand or attracting them in the sky, so the gulls swoop in great waves, lifting like veils to glide back and forth in the air, their frames iridescent in the light, lifting then settling, then lifting again. They rarely move further away. In the deep night the sea is the loudest thing I can hear, the waves smashing down on the shore, as if it enjoys this time out as well, when very few of us are mucking around near or inside of it.

A recent Griffith University research project, which applied a methodology of well-established studies in the economic contributions of outdoor sports to local economies, put the dollar value on a single surf break at South Stradbroke Island to the Gold Coast at over thirty million dollars a year. At one point, not accounting for economic downturns and fluctuations, surfing was

recognised as contributing to nine percent of economic activity in the city and eleven percent of employment.[7] But such data and reach appears to not have registered in the frontal lobes of this city's elite policy makers even though the council published a report on the findings on their website. In 2019, mayor Tom Tate turned up to a Surf World Gold Coast museum event in a Hawaiian shirt with no idea who he was co-presenting or conversing with. In amongst a bevy of home-grown world surfing champions, he was the distant uncle with no clue. To the despair of everyone present, he fumbled his way through.

A Smooth Sea Never Made for a Skilled Sailor—Surfing, Healing and Philosophy

It's far too early on a Saturday morning when I get a text from Tim Baker saying he can get me into writer's festival session he's speaking at that's supposedly sold out. (I'd wondered if it was still on given we're in what will prove to be the baby stages of the coronavirus lockdown.) My eyes want to go back to being stuck together but I throw off the covers and go, driving gingerly down the GC highway to the Burleigh Heads Surf Club, pulling into the Broadbeach Maccas for a frozen coke—a foolproof bender mender. It's eight am and Burleigh is resplendent in all its high-voltage glory. Athleisure junkies walking in their blow-dried hair and high-performance tights. Maori families nabbing the best picnic tables already. Surfers weaving between the packed parked cars, boards under their arms. Hipsters in their man buns and fluro short shorts patterned with ironic bananas or pineapples or images of Che Guevara. Clumps of Rasta-looking hippies under the Norfolk pines looking like they haven't slept and me, shades firmly on, because the sea is doing its endless stretch of sparkling glitter thing and the golden sunshine rolling over us all is almost too much. Almost.

The beautiful irony of attending a writer's festival event in a surf club on the Gold Coast is not lost on me. A city where the worlds of literature and surfing are more synonymous than they are anywhere else in the country, two worlds which had defined my life in the mid to late 90s, that I'd worked so hard to keep separate—now well and truly enmeshed. And so here we are, eating our breakfast while the sea sparkles beyond the windows over Burleigh Point and the speakers take the floor, to talk about the transformative power of surfing, and the life lessons they've drawn from it.

There's my mate Tim Baker, a guy that's made a long and distinguished career out of writing about surfing; Gold Coast surfing legend and owner of one of the city's most popular surf schools, Cheyne Horan; and Zara Noruzi (formerly Zarah Ghahramani) author of *My Life as A Traitor*, a woman persecuted for her activism by the Iranian government who found solace and healing in surfing. She tells us: 'After I arrived in Australia, for me, the first time I stopped thinking about what had happened to me it was when I surfed for the first time, I was in the water, got the first wave and for the duration of that wave however long it was, I realised I hadn't been thinking about what had happened to me—it was like finding chocolate for the first time, I loved that feeling and I couldn't stop … that force is greater than you and what can happen to you.'

Tim opens with a Timothy Leary quote, a guy who turned dropping acid into a legitimate research pursuit, waxing lyrical about surfing—even back in the sixties he saw surfers not as the dregs of humanity or the black sheep but as the 'futurists'. 'They are leading the way to where man ultimately wants to be. The act of the ride is the epitome of "be here now", and the tube ride is the most acute form of that. Which is: your future is right ahead of you, the past is exploding behind you, your wake is disappearing, your footprints are washed from the sand. It's a non-productive, non-depletive act that's done purely for the value of the dance itself. And that is the destiny of man.'[8] When Tim finishes, a collective

silence descends on the room—we all recognise just how profound those words have proven to be. Acid-induced maybe but tuned in to a sense of existence humanity is *still* trying to get right over fifty years later. Sensing the moment, Tim says, 'Well that about sums it up, thanks for coming everyone', and we all crack up.

The interplay between surfing, philosophy and art has never been that distant. Tim points out how much surfing culture has infused, music, film, literature and visual art particularly since the 1960s when countercultural movements introduced notions of consciousness-raising to the mainstream. I think of my second year at university when artist Tracey Moffatt came to speak to us. She was in town making video artwork, a spliced-up collection of street scenes shot in secret, male surfers dressing and undressing in beachside carparks, that would become her seminal work *Heaven* (1997). I remember the heady eroticism of the images, white towels tucked firm around washboard waists or slipping off, bronzed torsos cut and rippling, an inversion of the male gaze. As the film goes on, Tracey gets closer and closer to her subjects, a voyeuristic charge that becomes more of an interaction. I'm reminded too of the lurid cool of hometown boy Scott Redford's GC-inspired paintings: silhouettes of high-rises and palm trees against splashes of neon yellow, purple and hot pink skies and his surf paintings which turn the literal materials of surfboards into abstract art. As I write this, I can see the nine-metre-high bright red Stuart Green sculpture *All Eyes on Us* from my balcony, an arresting piece of public art rendered in plastic-coated glass that looks as if a giant had placed an origami flower made out of surfboards on the Esplanade.

Today, ideas linking surfing to consciousness raising and so called 'woke' culture are experiencing a resurgence as environmental concerns gain ascendency with attitudes towards self-care and healing emerging as directly linked. People are getting better at drawing the connection between their own mental and physical health and the sustainability of the planet. The very new-millennium surfing magazine *White Horses* was born on

the Gold Coast and exemplifies this shift towards recognition of the implicit connection between artistic and philosophical ideas and surfing—not as a side salad but as the main meal. The recent edition, themed 'Take A Moment', is an easy sell—quotes from thinkers and musicians, writers and mystics, an eclectic pool from Annie Proulx to Archie Roach, to Homer and Spike Milligan all in a high-gloss, high-design format where photography is still the hero but the language is sophisticated and big-picture, the images tagged with an accompanying Spotify playlist. A collectable item that reads like the future.

Cheyne Horan's connection to surfing is also linked to healing. When one of his best friends was killed, surfing was the only thing that made him feel better. It didn't make what had happened disappear, he says, he couldn't absolutely block it out in the purity of the moment as Zara was able to, but surfing helped him deal with it. When Cheyne tells us this story he's overcome with emotion—he is, in his words, still devastated, and even though the way his body his wracked with breath kind of undoes what he just said about surfing alleviating the pain, we believe him. Tim reaches out and rubs his back. A few of us in the audience make sympathetic noises. You can't help it. The vibe in the room has shifted. The fact that this world champion surfer is sitting at a table at nine in the morning and just letting those emotions loose is not what I expected. If there's a cardboard cut-out of an a-typical Aussie bloke or am a-typical old school surfer, Cheyne is probably it. With his open tanned face, big square head, non-descript t-shirt and boardies vibe he looks like THAT guy. But as his stories spool out, his unfiltered nature and eccentricities start to show. He tells us about the second time he experienced a healing in relation to surfing.

'I had an accident in Hawaii, I tore my shoulder almost like a chicken bone, pulled the bone off the muscle. I took off on a giant wave in Hawaii, I was the only guy in the water, I took off and the wave was throwing over the front, throwing over the back and I'm out there in the dark, I used to go out in the black just to try and

get it alone, and there's no way out of this wave so I've jumped off and I've gone bang into the wave and its lifted my arm up here.' He gestures to the ceiling. 'Back then, now they wear life jackets and stuff, we had no way— how do you get out of a big wave situation? I've just made it up on the spot, I'm gonna jump in, burrow a little hole and go into the face of the wave, this thing's just torn my arm, underneath the water I've torn my rotator cuff, come up, boards in two pieces, I come to the beach.

'Now, I'm in America. I can't go to the hospital or it's gonna cost me ten grand just to walk in the door, and I'm a surfer living off brown rice and beans. So I go to this Hawaiian Kahuna, I go and see Maui and I tell him what's happened and he says look Cheyne, Hawaiian's in the old days would go and we'd put the broken part underneath the level of the earth and the earth would heal it. And I said, oh okay that sounds alright.' The room erupts in laughter, it's as if all of these things are just normal or entirely possible to Cheyne, he's willing and open to anything.

'So I go onto the beach I dig this massive hole I put my arm in, and it's just ruined, I put my arm underneath and I'm about that far underneath the earth and I'm lying there on Sunset Beach just watching the guys surf when all of a sudden the arm just started to throb, right? And I thought, oh wow that must be it, that's the thing. So anyway, it healed my arm.'

In my head I'm like everyone else in the room right now, wanting to get up and go dig a hole in the beach and lay my body down in it. You heal your heart in the sea and you heal your broken bones in the ground.

Every single surfer I spoke to when researching this story spoke about similar effects. Without fail. It wasn't just that surfing was physically good for them, that they kept fit or that the focus required meant they were able to switch off—surfing was time out, from lives and responsibilities and a kind of active solitary meditation sure, but the experience was also something else, something more ephemeral, something to do with force. Zita had talked to me about sympatheia, ideas she had read about in Ryan

Holiday's book *Ego is the Enemy*. In the text, he draws on French philosopher Pierre Hadot's descriptions of 'oceanic feeling'—a sense of belonging to something larger, of realising that 'human things are an infinitesimal point in the immensity'. It is in these moments that we're not only free but drawn toward important questions: Who am I? What am I doing? What is my role in this world? Nothing draws us away from those questions like material success—when we are always busy, stressed, put upon, distracted, reported to, relied on, apart from. When we're wealthy and told that we're important or powerful. Ego tells us that meaning comes from activity, that being the centre of attention is the only way to matter. When we lack a connection to anything larger or bigger than us, it's like a piece of our soul is gone. Like we've detached ourselves from the traditions we hail from, whatever that happens to be (a craft, a sport, a brotherhood or sisterhood, a family). Ego blocks us from the beauty and history in the world. It stands in the way.'[9]

When Cheyne starts launching into another story about the healing power of surfing, I can tell he's really building up to something, so I lean in. The story starts off fairly non-descript—one of his mates emerging about out of the water at Burleigh with a look of pure joy on his face. That expression had gotten Cheyne thinking. He sat down on the beach and thought and thought and then bam—he'd had an epiphany.

'What makes you feel so good when you go in the ocean?' He asks us like we're in some kind of evangelistic show on late night free to air TV and he's really getting into it. 'There's something more than just the positive ions. It's more. When you go in the ocean, right? And you are actually in the ocean, not a swimming pool—the ocean—when you go inside the ocean you are actually inside the planet.' When the room erupts into nervous giggles he says, 'It's pretty spacey isn't it?' But he keeps pushing the point, like he knows this for sure, like he's trying to convince us.

'It's real. That's it … and you guys have all experienced this, when you actually immerse yourself completely in the ocean, you

can't breathe, you are not in oxygen, you are now inside the planet. And that's where the healing is. It's in there.'

When I get home from the event, I get changed and pool together the things I need for a typical session on the beach: books, pens, notepads, fruit, water, maybe a sneaky flask full of vodka and bitter orange, in case, as the afternoon stretches, the mood might take me. I'm looking forward to getting wet and getting healed. Despite COVID-19, the beaches aren't yet officially closed, and the sand is peopled as it usually is with faces from all over the world—the Brazilian, Indian, French, Cuban, Spanish and Middle Eastern backpackers who haven't yet scurried home or can't afford to, accents and beats from portable speakers pealing out around me. The perfect kind of swell for swimming just beyond the break, the waves all bulbous and rolling soft, the wind behaving, the water so clear and fresh my skin is a glass and I'm the Schweppervesence. Going under and opening my eyes to give them a good clean out, blinking at the immensity of this thing I'm in, that I can't see much of beyond the bubbling wash and shadows. Catching wave after wave until I'm out of breath and floating on my back, toes pointing towards the shore, staring at this crazy beautiful beast of a city I call home, glossy towers piercing a sky so blue and cloudless it's almost criminal, a small bream brushing past me, the sun peaking.

The Gold Coast and its surfing culture has had its summits and troughs, waves of brilliance and triumph, countered by falls from grace when the players have crashed down on the jagged rock of parochialism—tired sloganeering, old ideologies, old ways. This period of ambassadorship we're in might feel a little over-designed sometimes, too white-linen and squeaky clean to be believed, but surf culture is thriving and this blossoming is representative of the kinds of shifts I've witnessed in other sub-cultural facets of the Gold Coast, particularly the arts scene, a scene that once felt like a petri dish, now burgeoning and spreading.

What has changed is an on the ground feeling that maybe we

don't have to hide from what we've always known is so special about this place. The waves are cresting. A lot is going to depend on how well we protect the immensity and fragility of the oceanic environment we're so privileged enough to be paddling around the edges of, how much we push back against track dependence and save the city from itself.

I know the first thing I'm gonna do when all this isolation bullshit is over is book a lesson at Cheyne Horan's surf school, a guy that knows in his bones that one of the best things we can all do for ourselves is to get inside the planet.

Holddown

Sam Carmody

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Don't You Know You've Got Legs?—Sally Breen

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