

# THE QUARRY

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Dee Why Pools

We were standing on the rocks by the pools one late spring afternoon when I turned to him after a long silence and asked him if he had once loved me. He didn't see it coming. He drew his breath sharply in and looked out at the ocean.

And it was turbulent. The large bulbous waves sucked right up to the flat rock six feet away from us and crashed in on themselves. Teenage surfers gripped oyster shells with bare feet as they worked up the courage to jump off the edge and, once

they did, disappeared under the surface for a moment before entering the world again, shocked with cold and breathless, trying to fight the current that would throw them back again.

He told me that he thought he did.

I looked at him then, remembering the familiarity we'd once shared. With an arch in his eyebrows he gestured to the headland that rose above us, recalling with one small movement the warm evenings we had spent years before, holed up in his old car, hearing the waves surge beneath us, kissing with the fervency of secretive young lovers. I blushed, embarrassed.

We had passed the old pools to get to these rocks. It was a comfortable walk, our hands warmed by coffee and memory. I recalled days where we'd sat on the big concrete steps, watching the wide arc of Dee Why Beach stretch beyond the pool walls all the way to Long Reef. It had been summer, winter, autumn, spring, and we'd sat by the pools, watching the old men carve lines through the water with lean arms, up and down, following the sea-green stripes that laced the bottom.

That afternoon was an eruption of memory. I felt it all. He asked me if I had loved him too. I said I didn't know.

It has gone back beyond us, this place. When I think of that stretch of land I remember that young romance, as if those rock pools are shaped around our twenty-something love, but we are just a small sidenote to a vivid history. Endless seasons have flashed through the sky as the pools have had their walls reshaped by progress. In 1912 the rock had been split at the southern end of Dee Why beach in order to hold the heavy waves in twenty feet of hollowed out, freshly concreted pool-shell.<sup>i</sup> Between then and 1930, the walls were pushed out twice more<sup>ii</sup>; prophetically perhaps, as if the perimeters of the pool were increased to hold the volume of lives it would indelibly change.

Where my estranged love and I had stood on that frozen afternoon four years ago – the memory a mash of blue sea and heartache – so many had stood before us, watching their loved ones shriek in the whitewash of the turbulent waves that crashed over the eastern end of the pools, hanging off the sides to watch the ocean churn beneath them. The days were peppered with the heady aroma of seaweed and the

women boldly tucked their skirts into their bloomers<sup>iii</sup> in the rough heat, sacrificing their bare skin to the sun.

The pools seemed tame to me in those meanderings with my lover. They felt languid, sitting silently through passing time, the old Norfolk Pines throwing shadows over the darkening water as countless evenings drew close. But the old photos show a life that new walls have closed out. There they were captured, those '20s bathers, swimming-capped and jubilant as they battled the waves that surged over the low walls. There were countless others that sat on the natural rock that meandered down to the edge of the pools. The scene was slightly wild, the people so small in that large scope of rock and ocean.<sup>iv</sup>

I come out of the library with that lingering old-book smell – my head full of old photographs and words that have become so familiar they feel my own. The air holds the salt of the beach just the stretch of Howard Avenue away. I have just spent the last couple of hours visiting the past of this place – I want to know the history of an area that's become so important to my own story. I've become lost in the memory of those who have shaped the life of Dee Why, those that had founded shops along the beach or remembered the opening of the Dee Why Ladies' Amateur Swimming Club. It's a suburb full of voices. They tell of its transformation from a pastoral landscape to a thriving beach haven.<sup>v</sup>

But it's the voice of Alma Elizabeth Murphy that is the most haunting. One warm spring day she had ventured to the pools from Strathfield. It must have been quite a way to travel back then. It was September 29, 1936.<sup>vi</sup> She might have been quiet on her journey – I wonder why she chose *this* pool? Alma took off her stockings, her shoes, her socks and her hat and placed them on a rock near the water.<sup>vii</sup> Did she watch the surf like we had seventy-something years later? Did she also notice the full-shape of the tubular waves as they crashed ashore?

But into the water she ventured. She held an attaché case that was bound to her wrist. She'd filled it with stones that she had found along the way. I wonder if her heart was as heavy as those rocks were? Alma's last breath left her at the bottom of the pool; it was a small bubble that broke the surface of the salt water. It burst into headlines like 'Shocking Discovery At Dee Why'<sup>viii</sup> and 'Missing Woman Found Dead In Baths.'<sup>ix</sup> She held the collective imagination of a nation for a short moment.

They were horrified at her suicide. Mrs Murphy's funeral was held on the 29<sup>th</sup> of September, 1936. Her family requested that no flowers be sent.<sup>x</sup>

And these pools have a scary underside that seemed to want to suck the life out of its dwellers for a season of history - perhaps to show the uncontrollable power of a semi-contained sea. The teen Alan Carson sunk to the bottom of the pool in 1940.<sup>xi</sup> His friends didn't notice he was missing until his body was found floating lifeless on the concrete floor. A six-year-old girl was resuscitated after nearly drowning in 1946.<sup>xii</sup> In 1952, John Lawrie Sampson dived in, hit his head and never resurfaced.<sup>xiii</sup>

But there was a dark humour that also seemed to be personified by the deep water. Two old women were swimming one afternoon when they noticed the fin of a five-foot grey nurse shark slicing the water in a large arc. It had been left for dead by the edge of the pool by fishermen and some curious children had come by a while later, shocked at the sight of the monstrous fish. It was a warm spring afternoon, their bare feet danced on the sun-warmed rock and their freckles darkened by the second. The children decided to poke it with sticks and they watched the way the rubber skin tautened and relaxed, marvelled at the strange salt smell of it, the small eyelids that covered hidden, beady eyes. But its gills must have expanded and contracted upon this aggravation, perhaps its eyes opened just a fraction. They screamed. And timidly, they rolled it into the pools, back to the water it craved and where, hours later, it almost scared the life out of the elderly.<sup>xiv</sup> I picture the disbelieving horror on the old women's faces when an innocent float in the buoyant water turned into a near-death experience. They made it out alive, of course, but never forgot that agonising swim back to the safety of land. Perhaps they laughed about it later.

In other dark-comedic turns, Mary Flood was surprised when she was sucked out of the sluice gate and dragged over 30 feet of sharp rock.<sup>xv</sup> She survived, dazed and cut. Norma Newman got stuck in an outlet pipe and was saved by being pulled out by the legs.<sup>xvi</sup> Frances Hancock and her toddler son, visiting from the country, were washed off the edge of the pool into the hungry sea. She was near exhaustion and cut by rocks, but they both survived.<sup>xvii</sup>

It shocks me, this history. The voices of those that inhabited here have been quietened over time. These days the pools are silent and sedentary. This sleepy

tranquillity of the pools belies a violent history that is floating sneakily at the bottom of a community's memory. If you listen closely enough you could possibly hear their slight echoes in the slow churn of the ocean. Theirs are stories of joy, adventure or tragic, traumatic loss. We don't listen properly now.

I've only dipped my toes into the pools. I prefer the buoyant adventure of the open sea to the left of the old walls. But I will bathe in them in the coming summer. It's the submersion in history that calls me to the quiet salt. I'll lean over the edges and let my eyes skip over the waves to the horizon. I'll feel the sun tighten the skin on my sun-screened back. Perhaps I'll tilt my head so my ear is flat on the rock-edge and feel the vibrations of an old, enigmatic sea surging up through the walls and into my own memory. I know I will marvel at the endlessness of the ocean before me. It will make me awe-filled and slightly terrified. I will then do some laps up the long lanes, feeling the cool silence of the water when my face is submerged, then hearing the loud white-noise of the waves and tourists when I turn my mouth for air. I will let my hair float like seaweed. Perhaps I will even lie, face-down, pretending I am lifeless like I did when I was a child, not moving, seeing how long I can hold my breath, hearing the blood thump in my ears like a slow drum.

A year and a half after I'd asked if he loved me on those rocks, we were standing in the hot light of my Dee Why apartment. He'd come with flowers after a heated argument that lasted for days. We'd slowly eased back into dating again and it had been a retry as turbulent as the waves that hit the rocks by the pools. He was kind, I was stubborn. I was terrified of losing myself to love; I was afraid I wouldn't stay afloat if I gave my heart again. And there was an awkward silence as he stood by the open windows; I was planted in the kitchen, leaning against the safe barrier of the bench.

He asked me why I was so incredibly angry? It was true – I could feel the involuntary grit to my teeth. He put the flowers down and asked me again why I was so upset. I told him it was because I loved him, despite my best resistance. But after that the tide of relationship eased into a steady rhythm. He loved me too. We couldn't deny that the currents had taken us far apart and pulled us back again on salty, buoyant waves.

Now we walk by the pools often in endless sweet twilights. I stand with him in comfortable silence and we watch the distorted waves curl onto the rock platform. I see the surfers trace the edge of the pool and plunge off the end into the ever-changing sea. The pools form clean blue lines that are sometimes indistinguishable from the adjoining sea when the light is just right. The old swimmers come back season after season. The Norfolk Pines still cast long shadows over the still water. We walk away hand-in-hand, pulling the stories of those past along with our own forming one.

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### Works Cited:

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- <sup>ii</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>iii</sup> Jack, G. and Buckeridge, M., 'We Remember' from Wye, I., "80 Years On" *Dee Why Ladies' Amateur Swimming Club 1922 – 2002*, IntoPrint, 2002, p. 69.
- <sup>iv</sup> Mayne-Wilson, op. cit., Fig DY 14, Source: Mrs Gwen Jack.
- <sup>v</sup> *Manly Warringah Journal of Local History*, Vol 5, No 1, November 1992.
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- <sup>vii</sup> 'Shocking Discovery At Dee Why,' *Singleton Argus*, Monday 28 September 1936, p. 2.
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- <sup>ix</sup> *The Courier Mail*, op. cit.
- <sup>x</sup> Funeral Notices, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, Tuesday 29 September 1936, pp. 9-10.
- <sup>xi</sup> 'Youth Drowned – Fatality at Dee Why Pool,' *The Canberra Times*, Monday 8 January, p. 4.
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- <sup>xiv</sup> 'Women Chased From Baths By 'Dead' Shark,' *The West Australian*, Thursday 13 October 1949, p. 11.
- <sup>xv</sup> 'Sucked Through Sluice Gate of Dee Why Swimming Pool,' *Barrier Miner (Broken Hill)*, Tuesday 30 December 1930, p. 1.
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NOTE- 2 newspapers missing the year of publication