

Much Ado About Words - Katrina, Year 9, NSW

Years later I watched the Surf House blow out in a cloud of dust, thick, defiant clouds, and the clang of metal meeting stone echoing down the beach like a funeral drumbeat. People gathered, but not many. A few old surfers, some kids who didn't know the place's name. Just watching.

The sun fell hard on the empty patch of land, blazing without mercy. I sat in the sand, toes buried deep, and let the hot light spill over me, watching some repressed palimpsest of memories flash onto the dust, colours I barely could register as a cold wave of water rushed into my head, obnoxious, like the swell of performance before the orchestra ended, curtains closing.

What could I possibly find in ruins twenty summers ago?

I don't remember forgetting '72, almost like I hadn't, and all my summers before and after had simply just merged into chapters, divided by a rip where if I were to explore, I would be unlikely to return. Watching the sun rays falter, barely on the waves yet penetrating so far down you could see the reef if you were looking for it.

My first week in Australia had been categorised with bookmarks of yellow gum, the type they sold cheap in the convenience store counter. Pretending to be doing something, anything, so that nobody would interrupt me as desperate waves of English flooded everything, mind, soul, like it had replaced the very blood in my veins and this was suddenly a medical emergency where there was nothing I could do but to watch.

'Areyoucomingtosurf?'

The board I held in my hand had been something that a taller, older, kid had thrown at my head listlessly. Words in my head had begun tumbling into a slow, mechanical wheel, groaning with every rusted rotation, sounds rolling listlessly off my tongue.

The sand covered boy grabbed my hand with a mechanical grip, laughing maniacally as I screamed when we plunged into the ocean, the salt stinging my eyes.

I asked him 'Who are you?' and he only replied with, 'Who do you want me to be.'

I pretend I know what he means, laughing as he calls himself 'Lachie,' who starts to swim as he continues dragging me further, my shirt drenched translucent, he talks to me like a news reporter, loud into my ear as he shows me onto 'my' board; 'are you right footed or left footed?' questions washing off me as I just follow as he shows.

Eventually he realises I don't know what he's saying, yet he continues yakking off on how the 'SURF HOUSE' had been established by his mates and him as we wait for a wave, and for once it felt completely quiet.

That day, the sun bled into the sea, and we stood side by side with boards between us, wordless.

He draws a shaky map of the world, and I point to the middle of what I guess to be Germany, tracing the shaky border as he draws something else in the sand, two stick figures holding surfboards and this time, he labels it 'us', flicking dripping hair back from his forehead. I try to figure out what colour describes his hair, and the time, when do I need to go home for dinner; letting trivial questions run me over as we laugh over nothing at all.

Later, sprawled under a tarp behind the club, Lachie brought down a broken piece of a surfboard, and a bright red marker that looked like what had drawn the graffiti on the walls. Teaching me the names of things, like *sun*, *icecream*, *cloud*, swears to say to the older kids who threw sand in our eyes, different sodas from the bag in the back of the club. Teaching me names of the other boys who waxed boards and tied ropes, building platforms and stairs in the giant barn, teaching me names of books and different fish.

He asks for my name and I write it shakily on the sand.

He teaches me of a bear looking sea creature, 'This is what you are,' and I throw sand in his mouth as he draws a hideous catlike figure upside down, naming it 'Otto'. We name things as they are so that they become nothing but names at all.

The next weeks go by in a hot, sweaty blur. Lachie taught me English at the kitchen table every morning, (and I taught him how to swear in German), giving me some of his breakfast, and his mum brewed cold chocolate drinks from a green tin. At night there were songs shouted across bonfires, signs taped to lockers, announcements before comps, names of colours, girls who would flirt by, when to shout 'FIRE' and stuff your marshmallow into the sand before it burns your stick.

In the afternoons, we waxed our boards in silence, radio humming from the corner, the DJ listing tides and tracks in the same breath, living the last breath of summer holidays with pure animal instinct, diving into the waves whenever we wanted, chasing other kids in tag, daring each other to ask the old men fishing about their opinion on the arrival of aliens in Western Australia.

Sunbathing and breathing in the sticky feeling of salt stuck on my back, surfing, so far into the horizon we became shadows.

And one morning I woke still in the blue night-haze of cooling summer, from a dream in German which I had watched like a badly transcribed film, with subtitles lagging frames

behind like patchwork that didn't align. Fear of words replacing words that I called mine, here the sun rises and over there the sun sets, how sentences no longer come out in lines but circles, one door opens while another slams shut, yet the hinge falls off and the entire house collapses; I had taken off the hands and placed them back on the wrong wrists, and it was all flying away from me. I wake up and suddenly it's like I speak nothing, bullets battering against my window as I repeat to myself that I know nothing at all, that I was living in the gaps between words, losing this war of language; alright, well, how do you win a war that you didn't start?