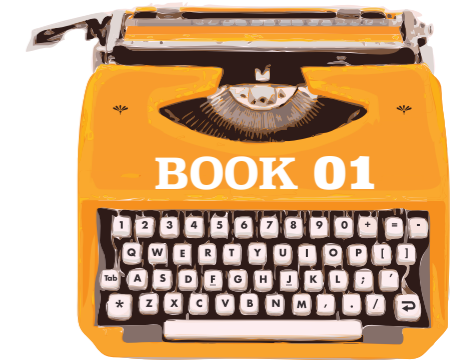


# Bass Coast Prize for Non-Fiction

2021 & 2022





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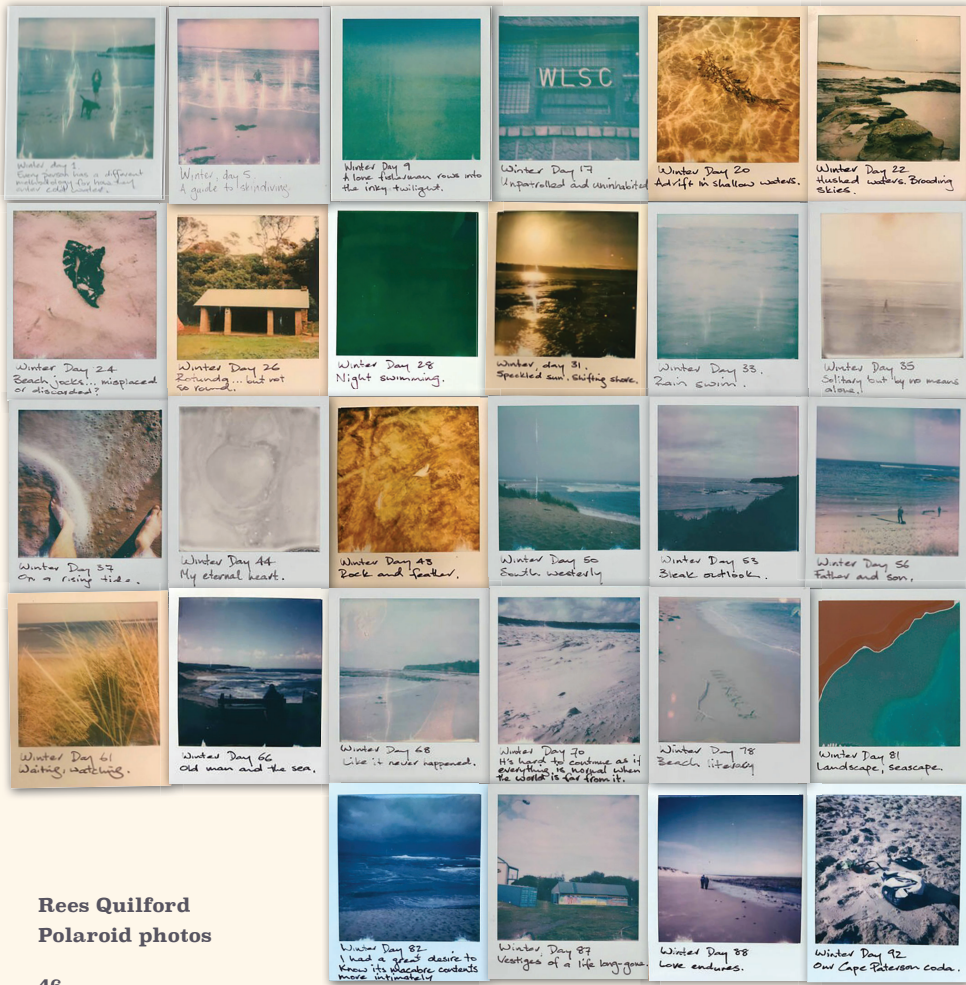
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**Rees Quilford**  
**Polaroid photos**

**Adrift in shallow waters:  
92 days of winter swimming  
walking & watching**  
By Rees Quilford

Rees Quilford won the 2021 Bass Coast Prize for Non-Fiction with an evocative essay documenting his daily routine of swimming, walking and photography at Cape Paterson's Bay Beach through the first Covid winter.

Every day of that first arduous Covid winter, Rees Quilford dived into the bracing cold of Bass Strait, took a Polaroid photo, and documented his thoughts.

# Adrift in shallow waters

by Rees Quilford

Each day of our first COVID winter I left the warmth of our new home, meandered through sleepy streets, over the dunes, down to the same secluded stretch of sand that marks the threshold between shore and sea. I walked the vacant coastline then dove into the bracing cold to swim in the sea. Every day of that arduous winter, all ninety-two of them, I returned to the same place in search of something different. Once there, I sought to reconnect with that once familiar place.

The shoreline I visited is a place of my childhood and adolescence, the Cape Paterson Bay Beach, the unobtrusive shoreline of a quiet seaside village in the heart of Victoria's Bass Coast. It's a haunt I've known since birth, one that elicits fuzzy recollections of sunburnt skin, chapped zinc smeared lips, and dawdling fishing.

It's a place for discreet consideration – where one can sequester in tussocked dunes, take long walks, and while the afternoon away rockpooling. In summer, its waters provide respite from lingering heat – the tideline buzzes with kids and oldies. In the winter, it offers wild seas and deserted shores. Irrespective of the season, it is a swimming place, a walking place, a thinking place on the edge of the ocean. Returning after more than twenty years

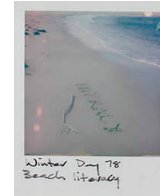
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away it is a place that I wanted to reconnect with.

In times of extraordinary disruption – when the COVID pandemic has shadowed the firestorms and smouldering dirt of the summer before – it's comforting to gravitate toward the familiar. We always look to the places and things we know so as a saltwater person, one born of this coast, I turned to the water and the sand in search of reassurance. At this bedrock place, I followed an impulse toward the icy embrace of the ocean and tried to make some sense of the grim new realities that face us all. Each day, I turned to lonely stretches of sand and wild oscillating weather. I immersed myself in frigid waters, I walked, and I watched. Then, with an old Polaroid camera found in a local junk shop, I photographed something of what is a beguiling place. The picture I would subsequently annotate by hand with a scrawled note or reflection. Those images – 92 inscribed portraits of place – form a diary of sorts, one that documents and reflects. A chronicle marking time spent at the beach during a winter of relentless disruption.

By reacquainting with this place – one that I had once known so well – I aimed to reconnect, to reorient. I hoped time spent in cold waters and on lonely sands would

provide knowledge and insight. I hoped it would afford an avenue to see a particular place and the world, in a different light. I hoped that viewpoint would provide a counterpoint to ceaseless screen-time and anxious doom scrolling. I hoped it would calm thoughts of fire and plague. Under the pall of multiple existential threats, I sought solace and clarity of thought in the place of my childhood.



## Winter, Day 78

The ocean is beautiful today, wondrously so. Clear, so clear that the lines delineating rock and reef from the sand are crisply visible along the sea floor. Along the shoreline, I notice a young woman on the beach. She sketches in the sand with driftwood while her dog sits patiently. Completing her work, she discards the stick, fishes the phone from her pocket, and photographs the message before wandering off. I wait a while before making my way over to read her inscription – the single word ‘LITERACY’ etched in the sand.

The soon-to-be-washed-away poignancy of this sketch resonates. My connection to this beach and the local area is longstanding – I was born and raised here like my father before me – but have lived away for more than twenty years. A quintessentially

country upbringing had afforded outdoor freedoms and close-knit community connections, but the approach of adulthood brought with it a compulsion to escape. At seventeen I looked to the city, to university, to travel, and to work for counterpoints to the steady parochialism of country life. Away from family, childhood friends, and the familiar I found my feet. In doing so, I think I managed to graft some semblance of worldliness that I wouldn't have found otherwise. But now, twenty years on, my partner (who was also born here) and I find ourselves buying a house back where we grew up. Our recent return is one of mixed emotions. On one hand, the abundance of intergenerational associations – intimate connections to things, places, and people – prompt memories and fond nostalgia. Counter to that is the awareness of the underlying conservatism (and on occasion isolationism) that infuses many casual exchanges. I am yet to find my people and place back here – a sense of displacement lingers.

My mind brims with these thoughts as I plunge into the cold blue water: A longing for greater connectedness and knowledge permeates my bare skin to query the salutary depths and I feel the urge to find a precise language to express these feelings. It is these notions that motivate my repeated visits to this beach, where elusive moments of literacy can be found in place. My imagination is stimulated by locative thinking about, and with, the past, the present and the future. This is a place where acts of walking, swimming and observation allow for a form of exchange between self and the landscape (Mills, 2020, p. 128).





**Winter, Day 1**

I am joined on the first day of this immersive memory making process by my partner and our dog. The three of us are willing and capable swimmers but the disparity in how we each enter the water is stark. Favouring getting the shock over quickly, I plunge straight in. Amy, on the other hand, inches anxiously forward, step by uncomfortable step. She can't help but cry out as the chill takes hold. Harnessing the will, she finally dives under, plunging her head and torso into the water. Nahla's approach is somewhere in between. Labradors love the water, and she is no different – loping through belly deep swamp water is a favourite past-time – but her ocean swimming is sometimes more considered. The water is no deterrent, it's the size of the waves that must be gauged, but once she decides to proceed, she commits wholeheartedly.

The physical and spiritual benefits of cold-water swimming have been espoused by many. Writer and photographer Tasmin Calidas (2020) describes increased emotional resilience, reduced inner silences and closer alignment to the cycles of nature gained through a daily ritual of immersion in the icy Atlantic seas of Scotland's Hebridean islands. Similar sentiments can be traced back to those made by Australia's mermaid, the star actress Annette Kellerman, who described the great debt she owed to swimming in her best-selling 1918 instructional manual *How to Swim*. Waterfeat vaudeville and open water competitions brought her good health and fame but also nurtured a childlike curiosity as well as a modesty of the soul (pp. 15,36). Another more contemporary great of Australian swimming, Ian Thorpe, argues for intimate and reciprocal relationships between swimmers and the water saying, "when we swim, we need to collaborate with the water in the search for the perfect movement, to accommodate it rather than resist it" (Thorpe cited in Bürklein, 2016).

Amy, Nahla and I share aspirations similar to those described by Calidas, Kellerman and Thorpe. While the methodologies we adopt when first connecting with the sea differ greatly, all three of us leave the water invigorated and more attuned to our surrounds. The exhilarating experience of immersing our bodies and souls provides a tantalising glimpse of a clarity of thought that has been hitherto absent.



**Winter, Day 66**

The westerly wind howls, whipping across the sea to roar at the land. A lone old man stares that bitter wind full in the face from the clifftop. Sitting on the bench, the wild ocean plays below him. Waves break across the entirety of the bay. That desolate chaos is reflective of the announcement of 725 new COVID infections here in Victoria – at the time Australia's highest daily case total for the pandemic and our deadliest day (Calligeros & Dunckley, 2020); fifteen Victorians died with COVID in the past 24 hours, including a man in his 30s.

Standing atop the clifftop, I watch that stranger regard the ocean as it batters the beaches and rock. An old man and the sea. Taking his lead, I walk down the hill, an old man, looking to dive into that bitter sea.



**Winter, Day 88**

Midweek visits to a beach like the Bay often offer up a glimpse of nostalgia. Around midday you'll often see elderly couples' holding hands out on their midday stroll. Today is a beautiful winter's day, a romantic cirrostratus paints the sky, and the ebbing tide reveals acres of hard flat sand. The perfect surface for aging joints and romantic strolls. I sit and watch an elderly couple make their way along the beach. Well into their 80s by the looks, they walk hand-in-hand, leaning into one another. As one who has experienced many forms of love on this beach – in clumsy adolescence and now in adulthood – the sight of this elderly couple is both hopeful and wistful. Proof that love endures. Endures despite time, despite anxiety, despite global pandemics. Love like that is a testament to humanity, justifies our place on this planet.



Winter Day 26  
Rotunda... but not  
so round.

### Winter, Day 26

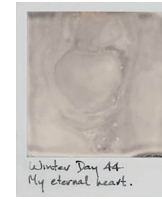
As a public shelter Cape Paterson's Rotunda[1] is eminently underwhelming but it is a structure that would play a vivid role in the memory of anyone who spent a summer here. Huddled in a gully behind the swimming beach, it was – and likely still is – a rite of passage place. Drawn by the intoxicating possibility and exuberance of adolescent interactions, I spent many summer nights here as a teenager. At the Rotunda was where mystery and sophistication of city holidaymakers collided headlong with the blunt confidence of country kids. Aided by an abundance of stolen smokes, cask wine, and green cans eyes were made. Overtures were exchanged. Second-hand whispering would lead to kissing and the awkward press of sunburn skin. Sand dunes were visited, virginities lost.

It was also an arena for vicious fights, bullying and venomous masculinity. Young men drinking too much and punching on. The old would bully the young, the big dominate the small. I remember one night in the late summer, early autumn even, when a young man – must have been in his early twenties – copped one of the worst beatings I've ever witnessed. It was delivered by a

much younger boy, but one who had been made hard early, one who knew how to fight. I remember the pack of kids goading him into delivering that belting. Fuelled by testosterone, booze, insecurity, and naivety the mob – me included – watched and howled at the spectacle. After the blows had been exchanged, the blood had been spilt, and the wounded were dragged away, I remember wondering how those two kids felt, subjected as they had been to such harried objectification. I'm sure I didn't think of it in those terms, but I was aware of the brutal manipulation that had transpired. The bloke who copped the beating would have woken sore and ashamed, but the other kid – who was a slightly younger mate – would have also shared that shame. It would have been humiliation of a different kind, but one felt no less keenly. My friend was a good kid, but his life had been difficult, he didn't deserve our provocations just as the other man didn't deserve the beating.

Some of those kids, mates I spent summers drinking and mucking about with, haven't fared so well. Many have struggled with the messy complexities of adult life. At least three committed suicide as young men. Messed up but fundamentally good-natured people who couldn't find their way beyond their immediate confusion and troubles. I was one of the lucky ones. I managed to escape, found my feet and a different life in the city. But returning to this place, to this Rotunda, more than twenty years on I see their faces etched with youthful exuberance, cheeks flushed from three cans of beer. They are frozen in time, etched in memory – young,

beautiful, and wild – while I have grown older, greyer, wearier.



Winter Day 44  
My eternal heart.

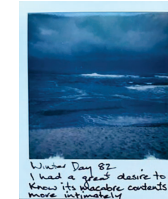
### Winter, Day 44

Cold water swimming brings the enormity of the world into sharp focus. Emerging into the immense unknown, I propel my body through the murky darkness with long strokes. This is my favourite part of each swim, affronted by the cold my mind brims with sensation, every inch of my body alive to perception in an attempt to attune itself to the water that envelopes me. Resurfacing, an acute awareness of our collective insignificance comes to the fore.

Today I'll photograph a beguiling formation that occupies part of the nearby rock platforms. Carved by the waves, the rain, and the wind, it bears a striking similarity to a human heart. A minute fragment of Nature presenting as Art. I've tried to photograph it previously, but each polaroid returns blurry as if resistant to being pinned down. Today is no different but that seems apt – reflective of ephemeral thoughts.

Staring out to sea, I always look to the horizon, where the ocean meets the heavens. The enormity of the world and my infinitely small role in it never fails to overwhelm. Never fails to bring humility.

This feeling is especially acute beneath overcast skies when great walls of clouds bleed into the reflective ocean. There I am privy to the briefest glimpse of something that eludes the day-to-day banality of our always limited understanding. Something akin to a line I recently read in a short story, "the something before the everything, its boiling fronts forcing life and space and time into nothingness. True no-thingness" (Gildfind, 2018, pp. 15-16).



Winter Day 82  
I had a great desire to  
know the absolute contents  
more intimately

### Winter, Day 82

It rains and blows, and the ocean reflects the same anger. Wild, scrappy, and surging seas greet the shore. A rip tears out through the centre of the bay as waves beat the rocks. The sky is low, dark and menacing. This is a notorious stretch of Bass Strait, a place of shipwrecks, of death and drowning. I run to meet that treacherous water which welcomes me in a head-splitting embrace.

Today feels infinitely frostier than the days and weeks prior. The cold seeps through my skin, lodges deep in my joints and bones. As the cleansing cold overwhelms my senses the ability to mark time deserts me. I force myself to linger, submit, until the discomfort is replaced

by comforting numbness. An inordinate amount of time later (likely just a matter of minutes) I waddle out shivering. The grim ferocity of this wild seascape is enthralling, seemingly reflective of the ferocity with which COVID is wreaking indifferent havoc across the globe. I am possessed by a great desire to know the macabre contents of this place more intimately. Numerous lives are lost in these waters every year, fishermen washed from the rocks, swimmers and divers drowned. And that is just the human loss, death and decay are evident everywhere – in the occasional fish carcass or jellyfish lying at the water's edge, in a feather found in the dunes, in the technicoloured array of shell and rock fragments that decorate the shore break. While joy can be located in the stunning natural splendour of this place, beauty and empathy can also be found in its never-ending cycles of death, decay and renewal.



**Winter, Day 81**

A brace of polaroids spit out of the camera signalling another photo failure. Neither image exposes properly. The misfire that does develop however, is utterly beautiful. A surrealist effect that seems to perform as an aerial illustration, a bird's eye view, apprehending the place just as

Indigenous artwork does. The colours are distinctive – earthy sunburnt browns give way to a purple, textured like sand, then finally the deep oceanic blue arrives. Shapes mimicking the contours of the coastline, echoing songlines and thresholds between land and sea. Today is a hopeful day, the number of new COVID infections here in Victoria have dropped below 200 for the first time in a long time.



**Winter, Day 37**

It was impulse that heralded me toward this routine of cold weather meaning making. The idea took seed months ago, late one autumn evening. Walking the soft and quiet sands while musing on childhood swimming and rockpooling – a ramble I've completed hundreds of times – I was confronted by the stark contrast between the optimism of my wistful contemplation and the hopelessness of humanity's plight. Looking to the dark expansive ocean I observed an unpredictable presence, sensed an intangible but undeniable sentience. Drawn to the fickle and unwaveringly elemental magnetism I felt compelled to swim. After carefully stripping down, I leapt in. Swam the rising tide until I found a comfortable recess. And there, in the shelter of the bay, a place of my childhood, I lingered in the

neck deep water, planted my feet on the sea floor. The ocean was sombre, predisposed towards the heavy bank of grey cloud that loomed overhead. Facing the open sea, eyes on the waterline, I looked to the barely distinguishable horizon where the steely grey ocean lapped indifferently at the threshold of the coming storm.

I found myself reflecting. I thought and pondered, speculated on ontological things – life after death, climate change, corruption, inaction, my inability to concentrate for any extended period of time. Winter would soon be upon us. My thoughts turned to the people that have trod this land before me. The Indigenous custodians of these unceded lands and seas, the Yallock-Bulluk of the Bunurong. I thought of generation upon generation who have swum this ocean, of the people who might tread its sands after me. I thought of waters that surround me and all of the actors, living and inanimate, that call it home. A forgotten titbit came to mind, that just like birds, fish sing to the skies above (Keenan, 2016). When I finally emerged shivering from that cold uncaring sea, I looked at the clifftops, where the earth assembles with the heavens, and beheld a world full of possibilities.



**Winter Day 87**

The COVID pandemic has prompted an enormous upsurge in diarying and I guess this project forms part of that movement. A ritual of journaling is said to prompt reflection and attentiveness whereby the act of actively attending to this day offers an alternative, and potentially therapeutic, means to mark time (Murray, Munro, & Taylor, 2020). The form of recordkeeping I have chosen is a rendezvous of written prose and photographic texts – one which (I hope) entails both remembrance and poetic speculation. The polaroids capture a specific moment in time, fix the grain in the picture so to speak. The handwritten annotations, on the other hand, are lyric musings about perceived connections and associations – both real and imagined.

Given the inherently subjective and introspective nature of this collection, the motivation underpinning its compilation needs to be unpicked. I see it as an attempt to bear witness on a particular place at a particular time. It is an act of documentation, one capturing my experience of returning to the place of my childhood after many years away, one capturing the turning of a season and the urgency of our time. Returning to the same place each and

every day, I have aimed to capture a different aspect – from jagged shores to vestiges of beach life long gone – in the hope that someone else, somewhere else, some other time, might glean some insight, pleasure or apperception from these records.



**Winter, Day 5**

COVID will cost me my job. The news doesn't come as a surprise, measures taken to stem transmission of the virus have wrought chaos on the global economy, bringing disruption and job losses not seen since the Great Depression. The closure of Australia's borders is disastrous for many sectors. That reality means my contract will not be renewed. I take to the beach to process the news. Easing into the sea the saltwater gently envelops me, a proxy balm. Immersed in the water I look west to the breeze that catches on the ocean's surface, and ripples towards me. Indifferent cliffs return my stare as I ponder what my unemployed future holds.

A familiar face distracts me as I leave the water. Now in his mid-fifties, Gary has lived here most of his life. We stand in the shallows while the early winter sun warms our backs. COVID is the first topic of discussion, we speculate on likely timeframes, the

fall-out, and vaccines, "We couldn't pick a better place to see out something like this," he says. Talk moves to mutual acquaintances, life in the country, and being out of work. The company that Gary had worked with for much of his professional life was restructured a couple of years back, forcing semi-retirement upon him earlier than he'd planned. He's philosophical about it, looks to spend that extra time wisely. Today, that means a spot of snorkelling.

Exchanging farewells, I walk up the beach feeling optimistic. Gary's hopefulness is infectious. As I towel myself down, I watch him don his mask and snorkel then swim out into the bay, making his way over those reefs and crevices. I'll soon be out of work, but as Gary pointed out, we are the fortunate few, we're here, in this beautiful place.



**Winter, Day 9**

It's dusk, unusually late for my daily reprieve but I watch as a stranger pulls his aluminium dinghy through the soft sand toward the water's edge. Once in water, he gives a final shove and leaps aboard. Locking the oars into place, he rows silently into the evening gloom. As the sole witness to this lone fisherman travelling elegantly

into the inky twilight, only the mechanised whine of a hastily taken polaroid disturbs the evening silence. There is just enough fading light to capture the moment, imprint its silhouettes and shadows – inscribe the murky greens, greys, and blues to the image's surface. The boat, a barely distinguishable smudge, lingers atop the water in the righthand corner. An abstract rendering of a fleeting moment. The adage holds that "fishing provides time to think, and reason not to" (Safina, 2010) so from the unthinking embrace of the cold ocean, I embrace the simple joy that comes from watching that stranger drop a contented line.



**Winter Day 53**

An undulating trail winds through the coastal scrub along the entirety of Cape Paterson's foreshore cliff-top. The deceptive familiarity of the vegetation on those tracks is interspersed with moments of jaw-dropping splendour. Walking those trails, I often think of Stephen Muecke's musing that "To know the tracks and the sites they connect remains special local knowledge" (Muecke, 2008, p. 84). Muecke was writing on the relationship between walking tracks and the traditional movement of

people over the breadth of this country, but his statement is true of Cape Paterson's hidden lookouts; the quaint wooden lookouts peeking through the shoreline scrub offer spectacular views of this rugged coastline to those who know where to look. That is where I find myself today, sitting on a weathered wooden bench staring over the sober ocean. It broods beneath a cast iron sky – firmament rendered more leaden and foreboding by the proximity of COVID. With this virus running rampant, people are locked in their homes. Suffering, sorrow and death consume the news while our waking thoughts are addled by the boredom that comes with being trapped at home.

The low infection numbers here in regional Victoria mean we currently enjoy relative freedom – of movement and from fear. However, the bewildering intimacy of the calamity engulfing the city can't be ignored. Everyone is acutely aware of the misfortunes befalling friends, family and colleagues. Those living just fifty kilometres up the road are in hard lockdown. In his poetic mediation *On Listening*, Martin Flanagan reflects on the damage caused by retributive banishment:

*If you find your sense of self, your meaning, through other people and those other people banish you, there is a pain I can only describe as existential.*

(Flanagan, 2016, p. 13)

The Victorian lockdown is frustrating and unpleasant and although I know that the limitation on people's movement is not analogous with banishment, my exemption



from the more punitive measures rouses feelings of guilt. I appreciate our privileged position in enjoying high living standards, universal health care and education as well as a free press and a robust democratic process. I also understand that the severity of the COVID outbreak is far less acute here than in most other places. Nevertheless, as I watch ever lengthening shadows, I can't shake an unpleasant inkling that we have turned our backs to our friends in the city.



**Winter Day 56**

The beach is vacant save for a father and his son. Rods aloft, they fish from the shoreline. From the shelter of tussocked dunes, I watch beauty reflected in the everyday normalcy of wiling away a winter afternoon dropping a line. A rod is cast. A squalling shower passes. Lines are retrieved. Bait is reset. The clearing sky allows a brief appearance by the sun. Lines are recast. No hint of a bite. Just the peaceful solemnity of two generations, standing side by side, lines in the water, looking out on a big enigmatic ocean.

As this scene repeats, I join the cast in the role of swimmer. The etymology of swimming and fishing can be traced to a convergence. The old English word

'swimman' – to move in or on the water, to float – comes from older Germanic and Welsh words meaning to be in motion. While cognates in Old Irish 'do-sennaim' and Lithuanian 'sundyti' signify the hunt and the chase.[2] Solitude and peace can be found in fishing just as in swimming.

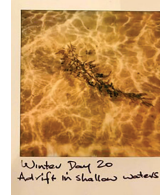


**Winter, Day 17**

The recently ruined Wonthaggi Lifesaving Club (WLSC) tower perches watchfully atop the dunes behind Cape Paterson's main swimming beach. A little over a year ago an intense weather system parked itself on the town and dumped more than 100mm of rain and hail in an hour. The resultant torrents collapsed roofs and washed away entire dunes. That foot-deep hail left the beach looking like a snowfield. The lookout tower and community hall bore the brunt, collapsed roofs, and washed-out foundations demonstrate the indifference ancient watercourses have for the nuances of coastal construction. Our rapidly warming planet and drastically changed weather patterns seem to deliver these 'once-in-a-generation' events far more frequently.

Teenage summers spent at this beach – long hot days progressing through nippers onto a bronze medallion as well as nights

spent camped out in the dunes – have created great fondness for this place. It's sad to see the clubhouse in such disrepair. After the flood, a friend posted photos from the 1960s showing the former clubhouse equally devastated by flood but looking through the records reveals that place has flooded at least three times in the past decade. Our memories are short when it comes to these things but those once vibrant buildings of the lifesaving tower – which have hosted generations of sunburnt kids, weddings, dances, birthday parties and hole-in-the-wall kiosks – now cut forlorn figures. The intimacy of the destruction wrought by COVID has dulled the immediacy of the longer-term threat posed by climate change. But these condemned buildings – vacant and unused – offer immediate and tangible evidence of the imminent climate emergency playing out before our eyes. I wonder what the next generation of life savers – our children's children – will make of our role in it all.



**Winter, Day 20**

Exposure to cold water triggers what is known as a 'cold shock response' – an initial gasp followed by rapid breathing and increased heart rate and blood pressure.

Clinical research has shown that regular cold-water swimming can habituate this response quite quickly. A dozen short immersions can significantly dull the shock response (Massey & Scully, 2020). Just three weeks into my swimming routine, I already notice the change – entering the ocean is far less bracing. In fact, I increasingly look forward to the icy embrace of solitary winter walks and cold-water baptisms. The routine seems to be stimulating some innate assuredness.

My increasing acclimatisation to the cold doesn't offer any comfort from the shock of the announcement we were dreading. Rising COVID-19 infections and untraceable community transmission has halted any thought of eased restrictions. Instead, home visitation and outdoor gatherings will be further reduced. People are on edge. The complacent optimism about virus control has vanished. A long and wretched haul awaits.

After hearing the infection announcement, I make my way to the beach. There isn't a breath of wind, but a taciturn frostiness persists. Irrespective of that, I manage to find a glimmer of hope in a seemingly innocuous feature. A knot of sea kelp floating near the shoreline grabs my attention – offers itself up as proof that the natural world continues oblivious to our ill-gotten realisations. In her evocative literary examination of how the delicate landscapes around the North Sea act as bellwethers for environmental concern, Katie Ritson points out that any uncertainty about what we humans unleash is offset by a sure knowledge that the agency of the

natural world will outlast our own (2018, p. 2). That kelp, adrift in shallow waters, is illustrative of Ritson's confronting yet strangely comforting insight. It also reflects the COVID situation facing us here Victoria, untethered as we are, in dangerous waters.



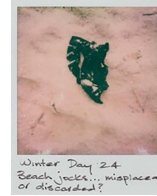
**Winter Day 22**

The reversal of the Sun's ebbing presence signifies the year as reborn. We emerge from the longest night of the year to gloomy and overcast skies. The winter solstice has been celebrated since Neolithic times and the elements this morning seem to pause in recognition. Hushed waters and brooding skies typify the scene. The beach's elegant rockpool, which is large enough to swim in, is particularly revenant today, cast as it is in gloom and shadow.

This beach has long been a place of escape. It's one of the many coastal bays on which miners and their families sought refuge from the black dust, toil and sweat of the State Coal Mine. Just five miles from Wonthaggi, Cape Paterson's beaches offered convenient escape from the hustle and bustle of the town. The ramshackle huts that sprung up around the Bay allowed weekends and summers to be spent swimming, fishing, and relaxing. Those

shacks are long gone now, demolished by order of the Lands Department in the mid-1950s (Hayes, 1998), but hints and traces of them still remain. One obvious signpost is a road atop the cliff called Hut View, but another recognisable cue is the manmade lido in the Bay's centre.

A surge in the popularity of swimming in the early twentieth century led to a wave of construction where amenable sites on lakes, rivers and the ocean were re-shaped as open-air pools. Architectural Historians Hannah Lewi and Christine Phillips frame this as a potent example of modern design's ambitions to refashion the natural environment to make it accessible for leisure and recreation (2013, p. 281). Cape Paterson was no different. An enterprising group of local coal miners and volunteers from the lifesaving club embraced that modernist inclination in the 1950s—armed with picks, shovels and concrete they engineered a predictable and safe swimming retreat in the rocky outcrop in the centre of the bay. About twelve metres long, three metres wide and a metre deep, the Cape Paterson rockpool remains a beacon for kids and adults alike.



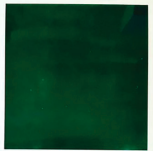
**Winter, Day 24**

Beaches are a catch trap for misplaced and discarded objects – driftwood, shells, pebbles, plastic bags, cuttlefish husks, thongs, kelp, and clothing. The depression era weekend fishing huts that once lined the dunes of this place were fashioned from those beachcombed discards. Nowadays, forgotten clothing seems to be the most prolific castoff, an indication that carefree beach life must inspire forgetfulness. The repeated recent reappearance of a rogue pair of black jocks, sodden and sandy, has captured my attention. They move each day, kicked inadvertently by passers-by or washed on the tide. As a serial misplacer of clothes, I appreciate how easily underwear can fall by the wayside. Amy has even questioned whether this recalcitrant pair of undies are mine. They're not, at least I don't think so. Still, their persistence prompts me to question the cost of the care given to this place.

Place, seen through the lens of identity, contemplation and environmental attentiveness, is a site of meaning making but also one with ethical obligations. Advocating for the revival of storied and nuanced senses of land and place, the Australian

philosopher and ecofeminist Val Plumwood (2008) highlights the problematic propensity to privilege certain places at the expense of others. Special places – such as this bay – capture our interest, demand attention, and are delineated from our ecological footprint. These places are maintained at the expense of 'shadow places', overlooked, unacknowledged and neglected spaces degraded in service of those privileged places. The council bins lining the beach carpark provide a clue to these spaces. Marshalling points for the waste consumed during the usage of this place, cast-offs to be whisked out of sight and dumped in landfill elsewhere. Those sandy jocks carelessly left lying behind will ultimately end up at another unknown and unacknowledged place. A shadow place forced to bear the ecological footprint of this beach and its activities.

Looking at those bins, I am struck by the introspective self-indulgence of my visitation and documentation process. Maintaining a routine of swimming, walking and reflection in this beautiful and safe place during a time of mass disruption and suffering suddenly seems a product of unearned privilege and accidental good fortune. I know I can't change those things, but providence brings with it an obligation to tread lightly and to utilise this privilege for meaningful and useful ends. I try to bear that in mind when walking these sands and swimming in this sea.



Winter Day 28  
Night swimming.

**Winter, Day 28**

"Nightswimming deserves a quiet night," so goes the R.E.M. song and that is what I find tonight. The shock of dipping my head into that dark cold expanse brings an immediacy of thought that activates every fibre of my being. Drifting slowly away from the surety of land I cross into the enigmatic depths. The notion 'to sink or swim' enters my mind – a figurative phrase associated with the ordeals of suspected witches – and with it brings notions of infection curves, moral descent, death but also ultimately life and survival.

A handsome gloaming lights the clifftop, fading light dancing betwixt sea and sky. I turn to the polaroid to capture that magic, quick snaps – one of the clifftops and the other of the rotunda park bathed in artificial light from a lone streetlamp. The sight takes me back to the R.E.M song:

The photograph on the dashboard, taken years ago

Turned around backwards so the wind-shield shows

Every streetlight reveals the picture in reverse

Still, it's so much clearer

I forgot my shirt at the water's edge

The moon is low tonight

(R.E.M., 1992)

The fragile winter sun has lingered but not long enough for the polaroids. My 'pictures in reverse' convey only a whisper of these happenings, capturing but the briefest allusion to a quiet, joyous night spent at the water's edge.



Winter, day 31.  
Speckled sun. Shifting shore.

**Winter, Day 31**

The speckled morning light dances on the spent waves as they drain off the rocks – a thousand little streams flowing like they would in a riverbed. I revel in that stunning light while dolphining out into the centre of the bay. Swimming (and walking) involve innate acts of resistance – one must overcome physical opposition from the elements to travel forward – but ocean swimming also requires a degree of emotional resilience. The swimmer is forced to reconcile their uncertainty about the unknown, about what lurks beneath the waves. Finding a way to abandon that fear is highly liberating. Pausing in the centre of the Bay, I turn back toward the shoreline and glimpse a remnant effervescence lingering on the surface of the sea. Created when my swimming stroke broke the surface tension of the water, it hints of something transcendent before disappearing.

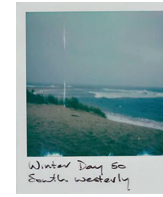


Winter Day 35  
Solitary but by no means alone!

**Winter, Day 35**

Sighting a secluded hollow in the dunes, I take a seat to observe the coming and goings of this small part of the world. The beach is sparse for a weekend, rising COVID-19 infections continue to feed an overwhelming sense of foreboding. While people bunker down, I watch and wait. Movement at the eastern end of the bay grabs my attention. Topping the sand spit, a young boy makes his return from the adjoining bay. Walking with slow purpose, he looks to be alone, but his parents soon appear trailing a couple of hundred metres behind.

I wait patiently. A beat follows the beat before. The boy walks into shot, one framed by the bay. Depressing the button, the polaroid mechanism whirs to life. A dark silhouette is captured mid stride, head slightly bowed, alone in that bordered view with only the calm grey ocean at his back for company. Solitary but by no means alone seems an appropriate summation of the situation, reflective of the one in which we all find ourselves.



Winter Day 50  
South westerly

**Winter, Day 50**

A howling westerly arrived overnight, stimulating the more sinister aspects of this place. The bitter wind whips white foam off the waves that roll into the bay. Walking into the taciturn cold, I dive into its unsympathetic embrace. The remedial but glacial properties of the saltwater surround my entire being. The cold seeps into the core of my body and I exit the water shivering. Still, I find comfort in the routine and ritual. Daily visits provide a structure to the day. A magnetic pole. A way to reset the mechanism of my being, orientating my existence with some certainty of intention. Diving into the chilling depths provides a fleeting but elemental connection to place through which I can position myself.

One of the Seven Sages of Greece, Thales of Miletus, hypothesised water to be the originating principle of nature, a classical element, the essential substance of matter. Water, within this understanding, is the element from which all else is derived (Aristotle, 2018, pp. 8-9). While modern science no longer maintains classical elements as the material basis of the physical world, there is no denying that the sea in which I swim is millions of

years old. Ancient water that seeps through your skin. A tangible reminder of the multifaceted permeability of people, place and history. Deborah Bird Rose discusses this permeability in relation to notions of belonging here in Australia. Citing the much-used pastoralist trope of the land literally seeping into the blood – an ambit claim that intrinsically ties one’s blood, sweat and tears to the fertility of the land – she highlights the paradox:

that the country that gets into people’s blood invariably contains the blood and sweat of Aboriginal people as well as settlers. It may contain convict blood, and the remains of the dead. It will contain the blood of childbirth, and the blood and bones of massacres. It will contain the remains of animals, of extinct species, perhaps.

(Bird Rose, 2002, p. 321)

I find comfort in the knowledge that the water constituting our oceans – the water I swim in daily – is an enduring fusion of time, people and place.



Winter Day 33.  
Rain swim.

### Winter, Day 33

The front arrived overnight, bringing steady rain and squally winds with it. The unseasonal mild weather of the past month might be the new normal in our warming

world – recent Australian National University modelling indicates that by 2050 Tasmania will be the only region in Australia with a discernible winter (ANU, 2019). Just a week ago, reports noted the mercury in the Siberian town of Verkhoyansk tipped more than a hundred degrees Fahrenheit (38C) – the hottest temperature ever recorded north of the Arctic Circle (Freedman, 2020).

Those utterly terrifying revelations have been rendered insidiously distant by the immediacy of rising COVID infections and today’s chilly rain. Relishing the change, I wait for a proper deluge before venturing to the beach. I hurry over the soddened sand. A deserted beach cast in a blackish hue by the pall of cold droplets falling from the heavens. That rain stings my bare skin as I dawdle in waist deep water. I love swimming in the rain – it’s one of life’s great joys. As the familiar icy embrace envelopes me, I watch the rain meet the sea. Millions upon millions of tiny little collisions rippling on the surface around me. Beauty and brilliance in each collision. Lingering to bear witness I wonder how this pandemic is obscuring the urgency of global warming – the most significant threat to our long-term survival.



Winter Day 68  
Like it never happened.

### Winter, Day 68

The wind makes for a bitter day. I swim at midday; eleven degrees, a forty-knot easterly. Unsurprisingly, the beach is deserted. A lonely stretch of sand, not a soul in sight. Even on miserable days it’s rare for the boat ramp lookout and carpark to be deserted, as it is today. The solitude is eerily comforting. I change in a vacant carpark, walk the path over the dunes down to the beach. Slipping into the water I take note of the biting cold, of the big sky, the howling wind, and the white caps. Wave after wave smashing against the rocks. Seagulls pick at the hightide line. An immense sky frames the moody sea. Leaving the water, I jog up the sand. The nipping wind bites my wet skin. Drying off, I glance both east and west, look to the carpark. Still not a soul to be seen. This is my moment, my experience. Just the gulls, the wind, and a bitter cold sea for company. A moment and experience never to be repeated. Never to be shared with another human. I put on my COVID facemask, walk over the sand dune back to the car. I start the engine, reverse out and leave the beach. The place remains oblivious to my visit, like it never happened.



Winter Day 70  
It's hard to continue as if everything is normal when the world is far from it.

### Winter, Day 70

A group of young adults parade the beach mask-less, careless, like it’s mid-January. Interacting with gay abandon, they hug, touch, swim and bask in the sun. There is no thought of social distancing. The young suitors practice cartwheels and backflips, parading like horny roosters. The women pose, cuddle, toss their hair and laugh. The beach has seen this a million times before but in the midst of a pandemic it seems different. I wonder whether they’ve run the roadside lockdown checkpoint gauntlet for a day trip from the city. The isolationist parochialism of that thought forces me to check my attitude, they’re just as likely local kids.

I strip off and dive in the water. Encircled by the bracing cold I look to the expansive sky and wonder what my 17-year-old self would have made of this shitshow. Today’s newspaper carries a collection of vignettes from children and teenagers reflecting on the impact of COVID.

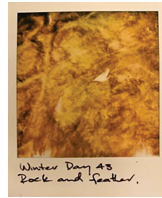
The poignancy of one in particular stands out:

**Mourning VCE year**

I'm upset and disappointed. I'm mourning the loss of what should have been one of the best years of my life. Year 12 is traditionally full of learning, celebration, connection – a rite of passage taken away from us. There are people much worse off than I am, and I know this is for the best, yet I can't help but feel the loss of what this year should have been. It's hard to stay motivated and continue our studies on *The Crucible* and matrices as if everything is normal, when the world is far from it.

Emma Christina, 17, Lysterfield  
(cited in Prytz, 2020)

'It's hard to continue as if everything is normal, when the world is far from it,' a sentiment one can't help but wholeheartedly agree with.



Winter Day 43  
Rock and feather.

**Winter, Day 43**  
After five days of fair weather the wind has finally swung around, and a change arrives. By mid-afternoon a strong, severe south westerly greets the beach. Normally a staple of this time of year, it's our first winter gale this year. Coming straight off the arctic, our south wester rattles your ears and chills your bones. The Bay is a good place to gauge the character of that wind. Today it is bitter and hateful, reflective of the state of human affairs. Standing on the threshold of that immense ocean feels like you're perched on the edge of the world. A vast unknown expanse fills the horizon. Dreading getting into the water in this cold, I opt for the rockpool. I find a degree of shelter behind a crag of rock and change. Diving into the rockpool, a sensory explosion engulfs my mind as my head submerges into the icy water. The entire swim doesn't exceed two minutes. Drying off, I spot a lone feather, literally blown off a seagull's back. Caught by the surface water covering the patterned rocks, it is a solemn sight. A reminder of the constantly shifting nature of this place, change seen in the rhythmic rise and fall of the tide, in the eroding cliff line, in the turbulence of wind. Indicators of change, reminders of our times.



Winter Day 61  
Waiting, watching.

**Winter, Day 61**  
Waiting, watching – two actions that consume so much anxious time for so many of us. Each day we wait for the COVID figures. Each day we watch as the world tears itself apart. Hate, polarisation, lies, millions out of work, mistruth, suffering, poverty and death on an enormous scale. All those things are at odds with the vista that dominates my field of view. Here, secluded in the refuge of the dunes, the entire bay seems stuck in slow motion. All I see is slow moving seas beneath the cobalt sky. Taking a seat between dune and swale, isolated from the chaos of the world, I sit and reflect.

I have come to realise that this process – encompassing as it does a routine of walking, swimming, and watching – is an exercise in personal reflection. Not just documentation for the sake of posterity, but an act that attempts to capture an exceptionally significant nexus of historical, contemporary, and natural forces. Observing this from the place of my childhood and adolescence, I have tried to pay particular attention to the natural world. Thus far, I am constantly reassured by the unequivocal disinterest it has for the current state of human affairs.



Winter Day 92  
On Cape Peterson cove.

**Winter, Day 92**  
For my final swim of this winter, I am accompanied by Amy and Nahla. It provides an opportunity to reflect upon the winter just past. A season of intense disruption blighted by widespread suffering, death and despair. One dominated by howling partisan voices spewing vitriol and hate throughout social media, analysis, and commentary. In the face of this dislocation, wrought by fire and plague, I have found myself – after more than two decades away – back at the place of my birth, the place of my childhood and adolescence. This coincidental and privileged return, in the midst of a global pandemic, has raised stark personal questions about connection to place, home and belonging. The upending of fundamental understandings which once seemed so solid has stimulated an acute sense of existential peril. Looking to process the chaos and trauma engulfing the world heralded me toward the bitter chill of the unpredictable ocean and to walk isolated tracts of sand. In that ritual I had hoped to find some sense of certainty. Now today, 92 days or three months on, the shock of the cold water elicits squeals



from Amy and makes me realise how accustomed I have become to the cold. The trick, I tell her afterwards, is to plunge straight in. Don't think about it, just wade out into that big blue expanse, and dive into its unforgiving fold—an approach that has

become my coda.

The act of reacquainting myself with Cape Paterson's Bay Beach has provided a way to reconnect. It has prompted a grounding through which to see my relationship to place, and the world, in a different light.



Rees Quilford is a Bass Coast based writer and artist. He is a PhD candidate with the non/fictionLab of the School of Media and Communication at RMIT University. His interests include creative nonfiction, interactive storytelling, short story and screenplay.

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