
NICOLE CROWE

OUTSIDE VS INSIDE: A MEMOIR — MAGNETIC ISLAND

At an age when other children were learning about ‘stranger danger’, I was standing with my classmates in soggy shoes at the edge of the water, peering down at a large and beautiful shell.

“See this?” demanded the teacher. Her face was severe. “This is a cone shell. Don’t you ever pick one of these up because it will bite you and you’ll be dead in five minutes.”

Large and bright and glistening, it was patterned with black and white zigzagging stripes. It was a pride-of-place item in any child’s bower and I had never wanted to touch anything more in my life. We bunched up in the sand, mouths gaping, rubber soled shoes squelching from the morning of reef walking, terrified of confusing a stone fish with a lump of dead, standable coral. A kid in a floppy sun hat crouched down.

“*Don’t touch it,*” screamed the teacher, lunging into the circle, putting herself between us and agonising death.

Up until the age of ten, everything was about survival. We had to learn to swim. Of course, every kid on Magnetic Island could already hold their breath for long enough to wrangle a crab out from under a rock several metres beneath the water. We were experts at throwing our bodies off terrifying rock formations and jetties into the churning ocean but in those cases we weren’t wearing heavy wool jumpers or carrying bricks.

Classed as rural or ‘disadvantaged’ due to isolation, we were the only public school in the entire electorate to receive a pool. Teachers held stopwatches while we saved one another from drowning and dived in to collect orange rings and coins. Treading water in sneakers or floating on our backs, we prepared ourselves for abandonment in open water, grumbling the whole time that the beach was just down the road so what were we doing in a stupid pool?

There were about 100 kids in our school, wild, sweaty, untrainable kids, skidding along the dirt tracks, ripping through the daylight hours on our bikes. I don’t remember playing with many toys. I had them of course, but there was

no challenge in toys. Barbie Dolls accepted the house you built them from cardboard and aerosol cans without complaint and lacked the initiative to run away. Yanking a pygmy bat from its dank hiding place under the house or poking a nest of green ants until they boiled out down the tree was much more satisfying. And presenting to your parents a shivering, three-week-old possum that you have exchanged with the mother for bread, elicits a reaction like no other.

Our lives were crowded with animals. Knock-kneed curlews massed outside bedroom windows and commenced their chorus at the precise moment the light was flicked off for sleep. Wallabies thwarted every tomato-growing effort with their voracious appetites, and cleaning the tree frogs out of the dog's water dish was a constant chore. The nights were vivid with the nocturnal violence of creatures who barely even knew we existed. Possums galloped like rolling thunder up and down the length of the roof, tearing at each other's fur, while the koalas broadcast their frightening mating practice with blood-curdling screams.

The war of Outside vs. Inside was endless and Outside was strong in number. Snakes appeared frequently in light fittings and large, bushy spiders watched over us with their thousand eyes while we slept, cooked dinner, took showers. And my brother and I were double agents as far as Dad was concerned. At the end of the day he would look us over, interrogate the cleanliness of our feet, check that we weren't harbouring any slippery or furry stowaways; wouldn't let us in the house until we pledged allegiance. I can't count the number of times my brother and I huddled in the front yard, teeth gritted against the stinging spray of the hose until Dad was satisfied that we wouldn't be "dragging half the beach into the house" with us.

And yet, he was the one who proposed, designed and built the possum box above the big drafting table where he bent over his work. And he fed the kookaburras. Beef strips that Mum had marinating in the fridge for dinner would go into the beaks of the fat grey birds. Like dollars in a high interest account they compounded almost daily, jostling for space on the veranda rail, feathers fluffed, black marble eyes staring intently through the kitchen window – they can sit there all day – until not one of us could step outside without being notified of some pressing hunger at ear-splitting pitch.

The 'locals' of the island were eccentrics who had found the 'alternative lifestyle' they were looking for as well as those who, hypnotised by the omnipresent and relentlessly cheerful sun, were, over the space of a year or two, unwittingly pickled into eccentricity. We were rich and poor and in between but the only way to judge a person's wealth was by the size of their house. Heat has a levelling

quality. Expensive hair-cuts get a whiff of humidity and rebel into odd angles and frizz, designer clothes quickly acquire embarrassing dark patches under the arms, and a morning's application of make-up has suffered irreparable subsidence by lunch time.

During the time that I lived there, between the years 1986 and 1999, Magnetic Island had a permanent population of around 1500 people. But at times this number was doubled by tourists, families on weekend breaks, resort clientele, backpackers chasing string bikini flesh. Magnetic Island was, still is, a paradise. Many people floated onto the island and bought houses on dreams of Gauguin and coconuts while the 'real' locals smirked and put bets on how long they would last. You couldn't just call up a friend on the mainland and meet up for a quick lunch because the ferries were infrequent and expensive. And then you might have trouble getting a car park at the terminal. Everyone had to have two cars – one on the island and one on the mainland – to get around with even moderate efficiency. My high school commute to the mainland (there was no high school on the island) involved two buses as well as the ferry and took three hours.

These new people were yet to understand the true meaning of inconvenience. Could they handle buying all their groceries at the one and only supermarket the size of a small house? Would they be happy with the choice between three restaurants of somewhat stunted quality? *The only take-away is fish and chips.*

The few services that we enjoyed on the island had no competition, nothing to live up to. But we didn't need luxury and any indulgence that was brought home from a trip to the mainland was all the more appreciated because of the effort involved in acquiring it. Blocks of fancy chocolate were carefully rationed out and a take-away-chain pizza, albeit cold by the time it came home, was greeted with the anticipation and joy of a birthday.

I didn't know what McDonalds was until I started high school. I didn't know about drugs and social problems and kids from bad families who started fights and threw classroom chairs into the ceiling fan. This was the World, where real people lived, where roads had median strips and traffic lights and rail crossings, where homeless people held out dirty palms for money, where you could buy a shirt and a pie and a TV in one giant air-conditioned building. This world filled you up with the smell of cooking and new leather and vomit and exhaust and thunder all at once. This was the place where people went to offices and did interesting things. Cafes and restaurants and bars swelled with people, strangers; you could see a thousand people in a day and not one that you knew. People in the World had places to go other than the beach. They could decide, *without any planning*, to get in their car and go to the shopping centre or the library or even to Cairns.

So I ran. The first chance I got I pushed past all the people running to the island in my rush to get off, to London, to the centre, with *real people* and palpable culture and history. Exciting things happened there – I'd sat on my veranda under the malevolent eyes of overweight kookaburras and read about them in the paper. London had dungeons and famous museums and punks and goths and subculture. It had poverty and crime and gritty reality. People there fought for important things.

I was spat out of Heathrow airport onto the tube, pulling my small suitcase filled with brand new scarfs and socks, bright with the anticipation of experience. I was fresh, sparkling, 21 years old, and I was *right*, London was everything I expected and more. The sky groaned like an old hammock under a fat old man but the city hummed and fizzed above ancient cobblestones burnished to mirrors from use. Not a single corner of it was left to rust. The weather loomed and the streets churned. Street corners were a crush of people, missiles of shouts and conversation hurtling, leaping, diving, colliding, hemmed in by red buses and black cabs. Then the pressure valve released, the lights changed and the streets were awash with rushing, dodging, ducking people, hugging their bags, late for something.

I found a job and became one of the people who go to offices and do interesting things. My clothes were crisp, my hair was neat, and my shoes made important clipping sounds against the pavement; the sounds of purpose. I was no longer stranded on an island gazing out at an endless ocean from the shoreline. I was finally swimming in the ocean, living in it, breathing it, part of a huge and vibrant ecosystem of cultures, ideologies, and lifestyles all lived furiously. Every morning I traversed the swirl of cafes and pastry shops sucking in and spitting out people by the dozen, halal shops with their windows stuffed with bags of coffee beans, women pushing carts full of flowers and men, sent hoarse by their faith, standing on upturned wooden boxes offering Jesus to the folded arms of sour-faced men. I swam through all of this before joining my own species in the office tower humming with the urgency of the media, thousands of fingertips clacking on keyboards, pouring information into the internet, information about punks and goths and crime and gritty reality. I drank Polish beer, ate Swedish food, watched Slovakian films and wore French clothes.

But as a pupil is expanded in low light, my senses had been trained to the relative subtleties of birds and crickets. Like an unglazed pot the riot of colour and sound and smell of the place poured into me and threatened to break me apart. All of the great paintings and buildings and culture engulfed me. The squeeze of the streets and the bars pushed me outside of myself. Buildings loomed; the horizon stacked up over my head. When I looked in the mirror I saw that my skin had lost its colour. In the cold months when the trees retracted

life from their leaves and the knobbed arthritic branches scraped the sky raw, coats and socks and scarfs were heavy. London was all of the extremes of the island, only the reverse. It was beautiful and horrible and compelling and revolting, humanity in all its grandeur and triumph.

Revealing that you grew up on a North Queensland island is an excellent conversation starter at a dinner party. People react bodily; chewing halts and they look almost pained, forks suspended mid air, cursing their own suburban upbringing. Eyes glaze over and images of Gauguin and coconuts are almost visible flickering across the pupils. I nod and smile, agree that yes it is a marvellous place, yes, the weather is always beautiful. I don't have the heart to tarnish the fantasy by admitting that I don't mind Gauguin but never really liked coconuts.



KEVIN DENSLEY

LARGER THAN LIFE

The Great Poet, a big man,
in computer-image style,
is morphing into something huge.
Bald head like a billiard ball
disappearing into beanbag body.
Seems he's having a hearty chuckle
at becoming his own weighty world.