

The Lotus King

There is a solid sou'easterly swell wrapping tightly around the headland, and the car park has been full the whole morning. There are people scattered on the dry grass on the hill, resting against the slope and enjoying the spectacle of a one-in-a-year day at Bunga. The waves are going right past Suck Rock, drawing the water from underneath and walling up perfectly. The wind just touches the water, slowing everything down by that critical fraction of a second; and guys from all over town are being shot out of barrels with their arms in the air and their eyes rolled back in their heads. Alex Blackley just got another keg from out the back, taking off so treacherously far inside, so close to the rocks, that the surfies from town in their flannelette shirts are left shaking their heads in disbelief.

“How the fuck does he do that? The mad bastard. That's just craziness, that's what that is.”

I see them passing a long conical joint between themselves. In his fishing beanie, my friend's dad puts one foot on a boulder and drags deeply as out on the wave's sloping wall Blackley drops a turn so long and so achingly perfect that the wave seems almost torn in two. I've seen Blackley tackle this place by himself, on those rainy days after school when I promised Mum and Dad I would just surf at Tathra but then went north. Where the forest is drenched and the spotted gums sweat in the light. Where coming off the main road you hear that unsettling roar, and are met with the heavy sodden smell of an ocean painted in fog. The solitary white blur of Blackley's ute. The board bag and towel crammed through the driver's-side window. The keys hidden in the rings of the suspension.

I watch wave after wave bend around the point and slide across the rock shelf. I see Ian the National Parks officer get barrelled, the vague neoprene blur of his frame driven forward powerfully behind the wave's spilling curtain. I watch my idiot neighbour Manning being stretched and beaten across the rocks, and I smile when I see his concept four-finner broken in the whitewash. The waves improve as the tide continues to rise. They slow up, become smoother, and with the thunderous claps of the first waves from every set tripping on the reef they become longer, grinding one by one that same angled path to the shore-line. Bunga becomes a gathering point on days like this. People walk from the main road in their ugg boots, lugging board bags and wetsuits and thermoses of coffee. Others get through in their cars, climbing embankments, cutting across grazing paddocks and stuffing puddles with bits of wood and bracken. Surfers wrestle themselves into their wetsuits and sprint up the grassy headland from the car park to the jump rock.

It is a debilitating excitement. They trip, forget their leg ropes, jump too soon off the end rock and are pounded ruthlessly into clusters of sea urchins. It is the sight of those ruled lines marching endlessly forward, the sun and shadow sketching their shape as they grow and crumble and spit at the eager crowd assembled before them. It is that brief escape from the confusion of waves that raggedly collide and stumble forward and die in the channels on the sand-banks. Good days at Bunga reignite in the minds of each surfer that possibility of local perfection. Bunga is that ineffectual yardstick cloaking those other days and less magnificent school afternoons in mediocrity.

From Bunga point you can see Alex Blackley's house. A wide north-facing place made of fading timber with a tin roof. Trees have grown up around it, but on a clear day you can see the glass and vague shapes of the things inside. There are only a few houses at Bunga, each with acreages that slope off to one side or the other and a couple that run all the way to the coast, stopping at the cliffs behind the point. When dark blurs are seen passing beneath the surfers' hanging feet in the line-up, each man yells to the other. On the hill, wrapped in their towels and with their children clutching at their dripping wetsuits, the surfers talk about the unaccountability of the past and those dairy farmers who threw their dying animals off the cliffs when nothing else could be done.

The Blackley farm suffered the worst. Painted in sweat, Blackley's father would pry each animal off the trailer with a long-stained wooden spade and Blackley, sunburnt and crusted with salt, would count the seconds each animal took to fall. When the tide was up the animals would float on the water, awkwardly bumping into

rocks before slipping downward. Blackley imagined their lifeless heavy frames sinking deeper, their eyes still frozen in the moment of their death, before scratching against the sand on the bottom. When the tide was low the cows would thud against the rocks. Often he wouldn't hear the sound, and would continue counting before peering over the edge to see the dismembered remains of the animal. The blood would stain the foaming water red, and the fleshy mess would dry in the sun on the rocks while waiting for the rising tide.

Blackley doesn't bother with the sharks. He sits out the farthest of all the surfers, his wide squarish frame and knotted grey hair bobbing past the final rock where the swell is chopped up by strong winds that bend along the cliffs.

Unlike the other national parks, the road to Bunga cuts through private property. Painted on the tank at the top of the hill is a large white arrow pointing left.

'Beach 1km'

Blackley painted the sign to stop surfers from town driving into his driveway. The peace he created by planting rows of dense eucalypts along the fence line and the tranquillity of the ponds and small dams by his house meant nothing when cars tipping with stacks of surfboards reversed and circled and got bogged in his driveway. Shirtless in a pair of faded red shorts, Blackley would yell at the cars:

“The wave is over there, you idiots. Staring straight in front of you. I don't suppose you're here to buy lotus flowers, are you? Where would put them anyway? You would put them in your pool as you dug a gaping dry hole in your flat acidic front yard and filled it with water. That's where you'd put

them. And when they died you'd come back with a bunch of rotting stems in your little clean bucket to tell me that I'd given you sick flowers."

Past the tank on Blackley's gate is another sign painted in red on a piece of old marine ply.

'Exotic Lotus Flowers for Sale'.

Blackley is the Lotus King. A few years ago he was on *Gardening Australia* wearing a woollen sweater and walking casually along his garden paths with no shoes on. The host asked him about the history of the place and Blackley gave a brief and reluctant account of his father's farm before launching into a detailed discussion about his appropriated water cultivation techniques. The host stood awkwardly beside him as he peered at the stumbling two-foot waves at the point and named rivers as if unconscious, his voice climbing, falling and abruptly restarting in the correct pronunciation of the places and regions. Blackley described the plunge holes, long channels and bending bamboo runways the Vietnamese used to disperse water. He described the plants you could eat if there was no food. He described the flowers and the way they grew back. He explained how the lotus flowers close themselves at night and how sometimes when the sky flashes so bright with the light of bombing and gunfire a single flower can reopen. The rest, budded in their wide green leaves, will hang just like the mud-painted heads of the enemy above the water. And there they will wait in the death of night, feeling the heavy rain and hearing the anxious, frightened whispers of young men nearby.

At the end of the show, electrified by his introduction to the property and surprised by the vigorous eloquence with which Blackley talked about his vision of

the transformed farm, the host described Blackley's property. Strolling up the muddied driveway toward the camera, he called it a 'captivating and successful fusion of hardy Australian tree life with the vibrancy, colour and dynamism of East Asian vegetation'.

I learned from Mum that he stayed in Vietnam for five years after the war. Right when the communists had punched through into Saigon, shedding civilian clothing and streaming synchronically from houses and brightly coloured beer stalls on the street. He stayed back long after Nixon who, shamed and fiercely resented by many, forfeited the war, offering helicopters and trying to forget the tragic nightmare of falling dominoes. When the Aussies too had resigned themselves to defeat, Blackley had met a Vietnamese woman and he stayed, living in her village, bent from the surreal horror of looking for an elusive enemy. Eventually they both moved to Australia when Blackley's father died. They inherited the twenty-eight acre farm nestled in the national park. In fragmented conversation, Blackley described the beach, the rich earth and the bright Australian sun.

I have been to Blackley's place before. I was only little, and I followed my Mother's thick black curly hair as we wound across the little bridges that link the dams. I remember staring at explosions of strange colours, the wide green leaves and the flowers brushed in yellows and red pushing out from the mud. The lotus king never said anything to me, but engaged my mother as they walked along, revealing to her the most exotic blends, explaining their regions, the symbolism of their colours and on that barren hill painted her into his own feigned vision of a place of endless rivers and curved gliding boats.

As the waves throb inward and we all shout excitedly at each other to paddle towards a coming set, I see Blackley perched way out beyond the point. I see him facing south into the wind that sweeps along the cliffs, fashioning the grassy ledge in his head, peering over and counting the seconds his father takes to fall.

Blackley floats there, a distant black speck willing the sharks to come. In between the abrupt cracks of gunfire he imagines the dilapidated frame of his father drifting downward, his eyes freezing the lonely moment of his death, scratching against the sand on the bottom.