

## A WALK TO THE BEACH

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Two hundred and forty steps – the distance between my front door and the beach at Tarooona. Under normal circumstances, my taking those steps would have been the hurried prelude to a brisk walk from one end of the suburb to the other to shake off the day's stresses and tensions, or perhaps to a pleasurable potter amongst the rocks to look for shells. But last year was different. Under doctors' orders, I was confined to base for month after month as intensive treatment for leukaemia gave way to gradual convalescence. Comprising the route of my daily constitutional (and the totality of it during my initial recovery), I got to know those two hundred and forty steps very well. Familiarity did not breed contempt. As the months rolled by and the seasons progressed, I learnt to appreciate what every metre had to offer by way of encounters with nature. Having a compromised immune system, I could not touch, but I could observe and absorb. I took solace and inspiration from the natural world, living in a timeless present and submitting to a level of mindfulness that is denied most of us in our normal lives as we hurry from one essential task to the next.

Tarooona is not the sort of organically-grown settlement that has an easy relationship with the natural world. It's more of an imposition on nature: a middle-class, post-war suburb by the sea. It hasn't experienced centuries of co-evolution of the built environment with the natural environment, which in other parts of the world can make it hard to see where man's domain ends and nature's begins. But through my wanderings I learnt that neither does Tarooona fit the stereotype of the bland, anodyne Australian suburb caricatured in daily episodes of *Neighbours*. Nature is all around us: it permeates the Tasmanian suburbs just as surely as the electronic signals aimed at our TVs, cellphones and computers. Best of all, tuning into nature is free – no pay-as-you-view, no up-front fees and no built-in obsolescence.

I could see Tarooona's stag-headed blue-gums in the park by the sea the moment I stepped out the front door. They are old enough to have borne witness to the lives of Tarooona's aboriginal peoples, when the built environment here consisted of little more than a few temporary bark-and-branch shelters, and the visible trappings of daily life were confined to piles of the discarded shells of oysters, the original pre-packaged takeaway meals, that we now value as aboriginal middens. These trees would have continued to stand tall as the first sailing-ships arrived, and as human affairs shaped their neighbourhood in unprecedented ways. The nooks and crannies in their gnarled trunks now host as many nesting feral starlings as native rosellas, and while their open canopies continue to provide dappled shade against the harsh summer sun, it's for the new Australians picnicking among Italian ryegrass rather than aborigines seeking tinder among silver tussock-grasses. Still they live on, aloof and defiant against drought, storms and tree surgery and marking an ever-more tenuous connection with a more sympathetic past. Over the months, I developed a sense that their looming presence defines our suburb today more strongly than the achievements of any town planner.

Autumn is a season that we traditionally characterise as one of death and decay. But my own convalescence began in autumn, and I was not going to let maudlin thoughts, hair-loss, the shortening days and falling temperatures put my recovery back to good health on hold. The leaves may have been falling from the suburban cherry-trees, invoking a

mustiness to the still autumn air and a slipperiness to the footpaths I trod, but life continued apace. As I shuffled down Devon Walk, corpulent, wingless soldier-flies, a speciality of the season around here, dragged their egg-filled bodies across the tarmac at my feet to some unknown but apparently desirable destination on the other side of the road. Nearby, jackjumper ants were still out and about tending to their gravel nest-mounds, albeit – like me – working in jerky slow motion compared to the frenetic pace of the previous summer. Drone-flies – superb mimics of honeybees – foraged lackadaisically for nectar on the last of the late-flowering asters that had gained a foothold among the crumbling mortar of a roadside stone wall, their feeding periodically interrupted by their overwhelming desire to chase off drifts of the asters' airborne, downy seedheads.

The blue-gums, however, were exploding into life, as the flower-buds that had begun to develop on the trees in spring rapidly swelled and burst. Throughout the autumn and ensuing winter, the heady, pungent, cat-pee aroma of their blossoms permeated the air around Taroona Crescent, and for me it will forever conjure up this period of my life. Sunning myself on the front door-steps and taking the vapours, I could hardly have wished for a clearer affirmation of life's exuberance. This unseasonal flowering was of no benefit to the swift parrots, who normally tie the rhythm of their lives to the flowering of the blue-gums: they had long since headed north in search of warmer climes. But it suited the cheeky and pugnacious crescent honeyeaters (for me, Crescent with a capital 'C'), who descended in their hundreds from the hills of their summering grounds to feast on this sugary bonanza. *Tichoo! Tichoo!* they cursed belligerently from the treetops, if not exactly in harmony then at least in discordant unison. Woe betide any other small bird who disregarded their proprietorial cries and attempted to join the party. Despite the apparent surfeit of flowers, they weren't for sharing with any old gatecrasher, as the honeyeaters' darting antics, bill-snapping and sallying flights into the surrounding airspace made all too clear.



Winter was cold and damp, the days all-too short. Yellowed and shrivelled, the wasted flowerheads of blue-gums rained down on parked cars, and the flattened remains of their aborted seed-capsules littered the roadside gutters and stained the stormwater. Our backyard chooks looked depressed, and scarcely ventured out of their hutch. Yet down by the sea, the sharp tingle of winter rain on my still-bald pate felt invigorating despite its chill. Rain may not be alive, but it brings life. This winter, as my recovery gathered momentum, the rains heralded a resurgence of brown tree-frogs. How they had eked out the previous years of drought remains a mystery, but as the creeks in the gullies filled with turbid, foaming water, they made their presence felt throughout the neighbourhood with their crepuscular *shree-shree-shree* calls. Rain also breathed life into the most unlikely objects. On daily visits, I watched as fine hair-like fungal filaments colonised a pile of dog-droppings beside the Alum Cliffs footpath. I saw the spore-capsules take shape and their stalks lengthen telescopically. It took four months for the scene to be reduced to a pile of powdered white fragments of bone. In warmer weather, blowfly larvae would have denied these fungi the chance of nourishment, and denied me the pleasure of observing this slow-motion miniature spectacle of nature.

In the low winter sunlight, the outwash on the beach below the main creek sparkled with zillions of tiny black zircon crystals brought down from the weathered dolerite hills above. The nearby shore was lined with drifts of soapy foam, manufactured in the turbulent creek from saponin-rich rainwater filtering down through the eucalypt canopy upstream. Gusty onshore winds detached billowing masses of bubbles and redistributed them in ungainly dollops on beached kelp and beachwalkers alike. Footprints in the sand told of the nocturnal wanderings of bandicoot and water-rat. Shattered shells of rock-whelks scattered liberally across the concrete roof of the pump-house told of the successful shell-dropping feeding ploy of the local kelp gulls. While I didn't generally want to dwell on the fragility of my own condition, I couldn't help comparing the gulls' strategy to that of bearded vultures extracting bone marrow from long-dead antelopes.

Spring brought a welcome return of longer days, laying chooks, the buzz of insects, and a flush of new green growth. The wake-up call of the kookaburra now began at four in the morning. Council workers enlisted whipper-snippers into action to keep the shoreline path clear of invasive grasses. Despite the scene of destruction, I savoured this new encounter on my daily perambulations – the sweet smell of fresh-cut grass is hard to beat. My hair also began to re-sprout with greater vigour, though it would need no snipping back for a while. Three species of cuckoo and two of pardalote began to call from the narrow fingers of gulley woodland that had been spared during the post-war expansion of suburbia. From my front garden, I could sit riveted as a male fairy wren battled incessantly and with obvious indignation with its rival reflected in the wing-mirror of the neighbour's car, watched also by a very disdainful ginger tomcat secreted in the shrubbery.

Explosive and piping calls heralded the return of the swift parrots to the park. But they couldn't stay long this year because, unusually, their favoured blue-gums had already finished flowering. One unfortunate bird, having survived two epic crossings of Bass Strait since last autumn, met its match when it hit an overhead wire as it dashed between park and beachside gum-trees. By the time my son and I found it on the grass next to the road, the glint had gone from its still-open eyes but its body was warm to the touch. Beautiful in death as well as in life, its sleek and unexpectedly lightweight frame was cloaked in stunning leaf-green feathers, while opening its perfect little wings to their full extent revealed gorgeous patches of crimson and deep blue that are usually only glimpsed in life as the bird dashes overhead. How the tenacity of nature as a whole stands in contrast to the fragility of individual lives.

The first warm day of spring brought the first butterfly – a cabbage white, drifting over the golden capeweed flowers in the park like a discarded tissue. Though merely a feral insect foraging on feral weeds, it knows nothing of such human prejudices, and so I welcomed its arrival all the same as a harbinger of the season ahead. The next day, on the sheltered north-facing bank of a shoreline midden long covered by windblown sand and seaside plantains, I watched the first basking male meadow argus soak up the heat before rising into the air to give chase to a plump queen bumblebee that had had the audacity to pass overhead. Returning home energised, I spotted a minuscule grass blue performing a zig-zag patrol across the lawn in search of a mate. Though it was flying over nothing but short green turf, it nevertheless managed to periodically vanish into thin air whenever the azure-blue sky was reflected in the shiny-new leaves over which it flew. Meanwhile, a scan of the ragged, twiggy skyline on the hills behind Tarooma told of the feeding frenzy engaged in by unprecedented armies of pale cup-moth caterpillars on the foliage of our

white peppermints. As the leaf-browning spread across the hills, I sensed that the concept of nature in perfect balance missed the mark somewhat when the impact of their chewings was so visible from a kilometre distant. Or was this outbreak not entirely natural after all – a manifestation of our increasingly brazen tinkering with the climate?

One memorable spring nature encounter was savoured by half of the residents of Taroona, not just those in convalescence. A female southern right whale and her calf appeared just off Niree Parade. They patrolled the suburb's coastline for several days, and at times were close enough for those of us on the foreshore to hear their exhalations and catch a whiff of their breath as they lolled in the shallows. A rancid, fishy-smelling oily slick of whale poo on the water's surface in their wake was a reminder that in the days before whaling, the Derwent's lush beds of giant kelp would have received regular inputs of nourishing organic fertiliser from the visiting whales.



A shadow of my former self on Taroona beach – but who needs real hair anyway when there's all this seaweed around (image: James Grove)

Fledging birds were everywhere in spring, providing tempting targets for predators. Native species hid themselves in the heart of bushes, but starlings, blackbirds and chooks seemed either more foolhardy, or perhaps just naive. Cats had a field-day, as – unwittingly – did cars. One evening, as I took a breather under the gum-trees, I had the sense that I was being watched. Peering through the overhead branches, I spotted a pure-white goshawk watching me through piercing orange eyes, with what seemed

to be an expression of intense aloofness. I wondered whose avian offspring would provide its next meal, and hurried back to lock up our own chooks for the night.

Spring was apparently not a season of bounty for every species. It was at this time that Taroona hosted its usual invasion of black-cockatoos. In the morning they would float down from the hills on strangely buoyant wing-beats, as if put under a spell that commanded them to travel in slow motion. They would rest together in the beachside blue-gums and chat amicably amongst themselves, sotto voce, before flying off noisily. For me, the eerie, screeching flight-call of these birds evokes wild places, and their presence in suburbia was disconcerting. Did they have a collective memory of what this place used to be like – all gum-trees, banksias and casuarinas? Or did their presence signal something more prosaic – perhaps a shortage of food or nesting-places in their usual haunts? Whatever the reason, they departed at the end of every day. But then one day, they came no more, though their calls lived on in the mimetic evocations of our local starlings.

I hoped the black-cockatoos' seasonal peregrinations had led them to what they were looking for. What I had found in my own daily wanderings around Taroona, I had not been intentionally seeking at all. It just happened. The natural world had been my constant companion. It inspired me and nourished my spirit. It offered solace and gave purpose. It helped in my healing as it has healed others before me. Long may we continue to find a place and space for it in our suburban lives.