

The Rhythm of Small Things

21/12/20

Four pelicans fly overhead in formation from the pastel blues and pinks of an early morning sky. Out here on the balcony I breathe in the first movements of the day: birds, occasional jogger, a couple of cyclists, the odd car, one or two with headlights on. It's still and the smoke haze of recent days lingers around like a guest reluctant to leave. It softens everything in a way that promises too much heat later. It's low tide but the current is starting to flow in, unhurried, milky. Across the passage, the mangroves and she-oaks have grown like a wall in recent years, a blockade between the passage and the surf. A motorboat with a solitary driver like a stickman cruises past, heading out for the morning. The engine sounds stir the air and the water fans out in symmetrical ripples in the boat's wake. Just now the rose yellow light of the sun rims the cloudbank along the eastern horizon and its molten blob casts gold across the breadth of the passage like a beckoning bedazzling carpet.

22/12/19

The sun is up again, on a high tide. I can hear the slap of the water against the hull of the yacht permanently moored down in front of us. We're part of its neighbourhood. They come ashore occasionally. The old silver sedan with the peeling faded paint on its roof is likewise permanently parked in the cycling lane along the esplanade beneath us. The skipper is an old salt with a long grey pony-tail and perpetual bandana. The woman looks like a reluctant converted landlubber, in shorts and hat and bare feet. It's a solitary life, to be set apart by a few metres of water and see the swimmers and fishermen come and go.

We've grown used to this yacht being at anchor. If the seas grow rough or there's a threat of a low, it relocates to the lee side of north Oberon Island. After a few days, when the waters calm, it returns and settles back into the rhythm of the tides and daily walkers. The birds take an interest. Ospreys perch on top of the mast and watch for fish. The slackest rigging taps against the mast now and then. Motorboats drive a leisurely six knots past on their way to cross the bar. Then the silence resumes, save for the water ceaselessly tap tapping against the boat and the morning coo of a pigeon.

26/12/19

Rest day. We walked this morning on our usual route, around to Blunston Beach and back. The breeze is still up. Blowy. The couple from *Swell Times* returned to their boat. He seemed hot under the collar towards her about something. She didn't react. He wears his car key around his neck to make sure he doesn't lose it in the water returning to the yacht. He is fastidious.

28/12/19

The wind is up again and the sun is about to declare itself above a rim of cloud, the rays already triumphant. A car towing a boat drove past to head down to the ramp to put in, so he thinks the wind will drop. A lone bird calls out. Now there are others, smaller, twittery voices. Another boat, pulled by a dual cab ute.

29/12/19

The corellas flew over a few minutes ago with their rowdy brass band. It's early again. Some have settled in the she-oaks down the front to the left. Others are on the beach among the ground cover. They've settled for the time being. The wind is still up, enough so the tide seems to be circling, which way to go, between low tide and beginning to come in.

People disperse, like clouds after a storm, as they grow older.

Yesterday afternoon, we kayaked across to Oberon. The pelicans were gathered on a sandbank with plenty of terns around them. A few kite surfers were out on Blunston, a bit in from the bar. Around on the surf-side, the ocean greeted us. The sand has amassed over there, a broad sweep of it between the shore and the bush. A couple of ospreys perched on a dead branch. There was a skirmish with a kite. It involved a fish that one of the ospreys had caught. We walked back around the tip of Oberon and swam in the warm waters of the passage, across from Blunston Beach. Two pelicans looked on.

30/12/19

Down the front, the passage looks colourful with swimmers in groups and beach array spread out along the narrow rim of sand. On the water, boats, kayaks, jet skis jockey for a clear run. Across on Oberon, dinghies have pulled up in droves. White furls of water trail the vessels criss-crossing the 3 channels. It's quietened down for now, later in the afternoon. The white corellas are back in the big old paperbark tree across the road.

The man from *Swell Times* came ashore in his dinghy. He had two books under his arm. He got in his car. I imagine he and the woman lying on their bunks and reading as the water laps their catamaran with the in-coming and out-going tides. Perhaps only one of them is a reader. Perhaps the other is a gambler or a dreamer.

31/12/19

Low tide, early, still. A few of the usuals are out walking, riding. A tall man with a little cloth hat and long pants, walks past. He has an interesting gait. It never changes. It's like he's leaning backwards. On the passage, one man is teaching another to use those motorised boards that have a remote control. Here is a man with his dog.

The two motorised board riders shoot past again like pros.

2/1/2020

The sun has risen quietly again, between layers of cloud accentuating its molten beauty. The low tide is tranquil, docile.

A man walks up from Bower St beside us with his little black and white dog. He's a semi-regular walker at this early hour. It's a good morning to walk with the cloud cover and stillness. A man with a metal detector heads down the sandy track to the beach. This time of year is rich pickings. This morning he finds a few pieces: metal tabs off soft-drink cans, a few stray coins and a ring.

8/1/2020

The tide is low and turning. A couple of SUP boards are out. *Swell Times* is directly down in front of us.

Today someone gave us an ornament for our 30th wedding anniversary. Two blue-green dolphins leap across white coral rimmed with some orange polyps and a purple clam shell. Underneath is a switch to turn on lights and the colour of the coral changes. It looks like a retro piece from the fifties. In a Tuscan town in Italy there is a beautiful fountain. It has a sculpture of dolphins frolicking with human swimmers diving in the water with their legs stretching upwards. It is a structure of pure joy and blissful interaction, of nature and human beings delighting in each other. I place the dolphin trinket behind framed photos. Its ecstatic pose seems bogus.

9/1/2020

Clouds mass on the horizon this morning to make the sunrise dramatic, seeping its colours through their layers and shapes.

The man with the distinctive gait, holding himself very straight and slanted slightly backwards, has walked past. He wears a different coloured shirt each day, but the same kind of trousers and a little cloth hat. This morning his shirt was aqua blue.

Across Bower Street beside us, the woman is up early. She sells bikes for a living. She fitted a bicycle on to the back of her black SUV, pumped its tyres, put the helmet in the car and drove off. Late last year the man left the house. He used to rise very early and play with the dog on the patio. He was a workaholic, coming and going for the business. When he was home, he worked on the yard, pulling weeds, mowing the grass, watering. He swam and ran. He lived in shorts, lean and tanned. Then he was gone.

We heard later he went to live with someone else. The dog remained. Occasionally she lights a cigarette.

10/1/2020

The dawn clouds are clustered on the horizon and the meek rosy rays of the sun tinge their underbelly. The water is a milky satin but a small rippling has formed on its surface. The regulars are around. The man with his little black and white dog. Cyclists, early workers. The tall man with the slanty walk and little cloth hat has just walked past. He wears a striped light green shirt this morning. Two girls park their bikes at the fence along the beach. They must be sisters, possibly twins. They look conscientious. They take towels down the front. They pose for each other with the sun's rays behind them. *Swell Times* sits serenely to the left of them a few metres further out. Now they're in their bikinis in the water. One is. The red bikini. The other in a black bikini is photographing her. Back at their bikes. They take a final photo before they put their helmets on and ride off. Slim as twigs.

21/02/2020

Back on the balcony before sunrise over the passage. The tide is high.

The sun is peeping above the mangroves and she-oaks over on Oberon, smelting its way up through scattered cloud, unhurried.

A couple of fractious magpies and a peewee have landed on the electricity wires just beyond the balcony. One is further over. Something's ruffling feathers. The far one has been given flying orders and headed south.

The cars going to work along the esplanade woke us in the semi-dark. But when you look out, there's a world of early morning walkers and cyclists silently wending their way into a new day. People walking their dogs too. One of the regulars is back, the tall man who walks with a backward-leaning slant and wears a cloth hat. His gait doesn't change. His pace remains the same. Steady. Steady. It is like watching the pendulum of a heavy old clock. It knows what it has to do. It sticks to that.

22/2/2020

Early. The night was full of winds off the water. The shrieking noise of wind cried like a banshee through a window left open. In the dark distance, the wild surf pounded dully like a muffled drum.

23/2/21

Late afternoon. Plenty of people have made the most of the day along the esplanade. Dinghies still dot the middle of the passage catching the setting light. *Swell Times* is stationary nearer the beach. Its people came ashore earlier today to shop. They had their bags with them. They unlocked their battered early model sedan parked along the esplanade beside the she-oaks. I gave him a wave when he looked up. He waved back in surprise. He said something to his wife. She barely noticed him.

7/3/21

Out on the balcony. Sunday morning. An old surfer type has just pulled up for his regular kayak with a mate. He's putting a bag of prawn shells in the public bin as people do. You could set your watch by him to arrive and make a morning of it. Kids think he's a skinny, leather-tanned, bent-over Santa with his bushy white beard and slow ways. *Swell Times* has returned. It put out to sea a week ago.

15/3/2020

We hear the woman from *Swell Times* has disappeared, that she had a fall from the boat and hit her head on one of the hulls, in the night waters of the outgoing tide. They are searching for her. He sits with his head lowered on the bridge deck. He has been in the tender trawling the passage. Perhaps her body will wash up, on the rocks beside the bar, against the sands massed on the northern point, or further down the island's surfside shoreline.

The osprey purveys its territory. Pelicans glide on to sandbanks. The corellas feast raucously among the she-oaks. The man with the strange gait walks on the path, his little yellow cloth hat perched jauntily.