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## ***Surfing with shivers: the Gothic Far North Coast in poetry***

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Abstract:

In 2015 Australian world champion surfer Mick Fanning disappeared behind a wave during a surfing competition, just as a great white shark's fin rose up out of the water. The frantic fish thrashed about, knocking Fanning off his surfboard, leaving horrified viewers unsure of his fate (Lutz, 2015). The live television footage, broadcast to millions, became an uncanny reminder of one of the most uncomfortable aspects of surf culture: shark attacks. In fiction, memoir and creative nonfiction writing about surfing that acknowledges the underlying threat sharks represent, their presence in the line-up is referred to using euphemisms, 'men in grey suits' (Orgias, 2012), their impact is compared to being hit by a car with teeth (Adolph, 2019), and the aftermath of their interactions with humans is either horrific and tragic, or the inspiration for stories of resilience and adaptation (McAloon, 2016). The depiction of sharks in surfing culture is either darkly humorous or steeped in mythology (McCarthy, 2020). It is for these reasons the depictions fit within a Gothic tradition. My previous work on Australian coastal Gothic writing (Hawryluk, 2020) describes a place with underlying Gothic tones. The town of Ballina on the Far North Coast of New South Wales is one such place, becoming known internationally for a spate of shark attacks between 2015-2016 (McVeigh, 2016). This paper adds to existing Australian coastal Gothic writing and research focused on surf culture and depictions of interactions between surfers and sharks. A suite of my creative nonfiction poetry featured within demonstrates the Gothic elements present in Ballina's history of shark attacks, interactions, and the way the town and its surfers have responded to its reputation as 'shark city' (Smith, 2016).

Biographical note:

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Jeffreys Bay in South Africa, known as J-Bay to surfers and locals, has been long revered as a premier surf break in a coastline awash with excellent breaks (Miletic, 2015). In recent times, that reputation has taken a sinister turn following a shark attack on a world-renowned surfer, broadcast live to an international audience (Lutz, 2015). In the final of the 2015 J-Bay Open World Surf League event, acclaimed Australian surfer Mick Fanning was paddling behind the lines of swell, ready to pounce on the best wave available. Television footage broadcast from the event shows a commotion in the water around him, then a long black shark's fin rolls over into the air near his legs. Fanning's reaction is swift and furious, flailing in the turbulent water as his head snaps back from a blow from the enormous creature. In front of a transfixed and horrified commentary team and millions of viewers, Fanning disappears behind the perfectly formed wave he was waiting for.

Unsure of the champion surfers' fate, the television cameras zoom away from the scene, as jet skis and a dive boat seek out Fanning and his fellow competitor Julian Wilson. The surfers are plucked from the water, shaken but physically unharmed.

The live television footage was broadcast to millions and quickly gained an even larger audience on YouTube replays (World Surf League, 2015). One of the few real-time recordings of human-shark interactions, it stands as an uncanny reminder of one of the most unspoken aspects of surf culture: shark attacks. Such is the innate fear of sharks for surfers and ocean swimmers alike, the footage is compelling yet nausea-inducing. The incident brought shark encounters and the dangers of surfing to the awareness of the mainstream.

Representation of contemporary western surf culture spans written and visual forms, from 1960s TV series *Gidget*, surf music from The Beach Boys to Jack Johnson, and surfboard and clothing companies such as Rip Curl extolling 'the search' (Rip Curl, 2021). The surf culture industry manufactures an image and lifestyle that is focused on athletic prowess, travel to exotic, rustic locales, and a laid-back beach culture vibe. The carefree imagery of surfing has been promoted by magazines like *The Surfers Journal*, documentaries such as *The Endless Summer* (1966) and the Australian surfing odyssey *Morning of the Earth* (1972), and the cult classic film *Big Wednesday* (1978). The focus on surfing as an idyllic lifestyle prevalent in these examples is at odds with the undercurrent of menace that sharks bring to surfing, and to coastal communities where shark-related incidents occur. Within surfing communities, shark attacks, though rare, are a constant spectre, especially in Australia.

Perhaps because of this, acknowledgment of sharks and shark-related incidents in written and filmed surf culture is often depicted in either darkly humorous or mythological terms (McCarthy, 2020). These depictions fit within a Gothic tradition and correspond to the Gothic hallmarks of the uncanny and unsettling. This is especially true in the reaction of the surfing community and locals to a series of shark attacks on the Far North Coast of New South Wales Australia, in a coastal community called Ballina.

A Ballina-based Instagram page treats the subject matter irreverently, even positioning the coastal town as a site of shark activity in its tagline: ‘A place where the People meet the river, the River meets the sea, and the Sea meets the Whites’ (Balna.nsw, 2021). A favoured bumper sticker among local surfers features the word Balna (a colloquial name for Ballina, pronounced with an Australian accent) with the letter A stylised to mimic the infamous *Jaws* movie poster of a shark’s open mouth approaching an unsuspecting swimmer. Another sticker uses the same *Jaws*-inspired shark image along with the words ‘Surfed Ballina and survived’ (Schmick Stickers, 2021). Limited release t-shirts exist where the iconic *Jaws* font has been adapted to ‘Balna’, using the original movie poster image, as well as the immortal line ‘You’re going to need a bigger boat’ (Benchley, 1975).

Previous work on Australian coastal Gothic writing (Hawryluk, 2020) describes places with underlying Gothic tones, a landscape that is ‘uncanny, haunted, and filled with history and memories’ (ibid, p. 93). The town of Ballina on the Far North Coast of New South Wales is such a place, having become known internationally for a spate of shark attacks, particularly during 2015 (McVeigh, 2016). Of four shark attacks in 2015, two occurred at the popular surf break on Lighthouse Beach near the Ballina bar, and one involving Japanese national Tadashi Nakahara was fatal. The attack on Nakahara was so silent, so brutal and so quick that a witness described it as ‘prehistoric’ (McAloon, 2016, p. 9).

This paper will add to an emerging body of research about Australian coastal Gothic writing, focusing here on surf culture and depictions of interactions between surfers and sharks. The essay presented here is comprised of a critical analysis of the genre and creative works responding to surf culture within Ballina shire, particularly as it is informed by the prevalence of sharks as a part of that culture. The following suite of creative nonfiction poetry demonstrates the Gothic elements present in Ballina’s history of shark attacks, interactions, and the way the town and its surfers have responded to its reputation as ‘shark city’ (Smith, 2016).

Fiction, memoir, and creative nonfiction writing about surfing that acknowledges the presence of sharks is not very common. Indeed, the representation of surf culture that dominates the sport and industry relies on images of a carefree wanderlust unbothered by the pragmatism of any risks associated with surfing. Looking closely at surf writing by, about and for surfers, the appearance of sharks and their inherent underlying menace exists in a small but significant body of work.

Tim Winton’s *Breath* (2008) weaves the dangers of sharks, giant swell and complex interpersonal relationships into a compelling surf-based narrative, while memoirs by Kathrein (2012), Hamilton (2004) and de Gelder (2011) focus on conservation, Christianity and resilience-building as responses to shark attacks. Oregon carpenter and surfer Kenny Doudt’s story of survival, *Surfing with the Great White Shark* (1999) seems improbably exploitative, if only by the author/survivor himself. In these memoirs, the outcome of interactions between sharks and humans is either horrific and tragic, or provides inspiration for resilience and

adaptation (McAloon, 2016). Other fictional accounts of surfing where sharks are highlighted include *Surfing Goliath* (Hyde, 2006), a YA story about a monster shark which arrives at a coastal community along with the annual large swell.

This work on depicting sharks and surfing extends to scientific research with surfboards used as props and bait, as described in Casey's *The Devil's Teeth* (2010), a comprehensive guide to the shark breeding ground of the Farallon Islands off the coast of San Francisco. There, in icy bottle green water, a shiver of great white sharks come to hunt in September. When they do, a team of researchers monitor their movements and eating habits, sometimes engineering scenarios to see the results: such as placing surfboards in the water near 18-foot great white sharks. Orgias' *Man in a grey suit* (2012) uses a commonly known euphemism from the lineup to refer to sharks, including the one which removed his hand cleanly from his arm in an attack in the water at world-famous Bondi Beach. The book cover art depicts a surfer astride a surfboard surrounded by aqua water, descending into darker colours, presumably where men in grey suits lay in wait. This image evokes the feeling of dread and anticipation that underscores the peaceful feeling of waiting on the surface of the ocean, vulnerable and unaware.

The imagery used in written accounts of shark encounters and attacks provides a starting point for the first poem in my suite, which focuses on the ways surfing inhabits daily thoughts and night-time dreams.

### **Out the back**

Before awakening, a tension shoots across my heart  
 An expectation of the day ahead  
 Struggling across a sweep into the newly born sun  
 Through a spin cycle, followed by a rinse  
 Sinuses cauterised by saline  
 Teeth gritted against another whitewash welcome  
 The ocean is a washing machine this morning  
 Where I am the lost sock in the Laundromat of life

Duck dive Eskimo roll leg pulled taut by a polyurethane rope  
 Cuffed to the ankle and stunning in its severity  
 Jellyfish brush against cold hands clutching layers  
 Of plywood glass and resin  
 Gotta grab this triple-decker sandwich  
 Get set upon the stringer and paddle even harder  
 So far, the scariest part of surfing is waves pounding punters into rocks and reef  
 And not the hidden menace skulking silently underneath

Arrive at last out the back of a calming green pond  
 Beyond the breakers the ocean is blissful

Rolling swell carrying the line-up in one fluid motion  
 I catch up with breathing while waiting  
 Between bronzed boys on short boards  
 My vessel is a b-double in a sea of sedans  
 Silence surrounds me  
 Sit up satisfied, saltwater sweat leaving a slick in the surf and  
 Realise I am still dreaming

The creative nonfiction poem 'Out the back' likens the lurking presence under the waves to a spectral figure haunting dreams: dreams filtered through memories of pushing through the whitewash of a shore break to reach the green expanse beyond. The physicality of the experience is expressed through descriptions of the surfboard materials, the sensation of being swamped by waves, and the relative calm on the other side of the breakers. These evoke the sensations depicted in scenes of shark attacks in the key texts cited: struggling against an overwhelming shocking force, the eerie quiet after the first lunge and bite by a great fish, and the layers of skin and tendons exposed by the attack, revealing the inner layers of a human body (Orgias, 2012).

Firsthand accounts of shark attacks are the subject of *Sharks Never Sleep* (McAloon, 2016), including several which occurred at Ballina beaches. In 2015, 'a remarkable 9 per cent of the world's total shark attacks ... happened in the Ballina shire' (ibid, p. 140), a statistic that is as impressive as it is chilling. The book centres stories of shark attack victims, witnesses and first responders and communities around the brutal death of Tadashi Nakahara, a Japanese national who was mauled by a shark at a local reef break called Speeds. This is the subject of the poem 'Speeds reef', which highlights the random nature of the incident, occurring within metres of other surfers and in almost complete silence, save for the tragic surfer's final 'huge breath' (McAloon, 2016, p. 7). The poem places the surfers at the precipice of danger, enjoying the surf conditions while a great danger lies just beneath them.

### Speeds reef

The endless ocean begins to the east of here  
 Dropping in at the edge of the continental shelf  
 Where the bottom is nowhere to be found

Under brilliant green welcoming waves  
 'Out there is a Perfect Engine, an Eating Machine  
 a miracle of evolution'  
 with one blank eye on the sun  
 and the other on surfers straddling logs  
 legs astride and surfboards poised  
 waiting for their set to come in

Sharp black fins slice through

carve the wave in two  
sun burnt pandanus trees watch from the edges of the lookout  
overlooking the shoreline and clusters of sharp granite  
that point the way to Speeds Reef  
Just offshore surfers mill about in the line-up  
Sitting and waiting above the surface  
scanning the horizon where the swell comes from

In the underworld of the ocean  
an apex predator does its daily thing  
the great fish skimming the shelf for prey  
hiding in the depths, seeking out signals of distress  
then sneaking along the sandy seabed  
before roaring to the water's edge  
toward a pair of dangling languid feet

The physical impact of a shark attack has been likened to being hit by a car with teeth (Adolph, 2019), and the ferocity of the attack on Nakahara in 2015 was no less severe. 'Speeds reef' namechecks the location of the incident, a reef break at the edge of an immense continental shelf, beyond which lies the vast ocean. The dichotomy of the world below the surface to that above is highlighted by the binary nature of their descriptions: light filled versus dark and brackish. A quote from Peter Benchley's *Jaws* (1975) about the 'perfect engine' of the shark is a nod to his most seminal shark text. The poem ends by referencing the audible approach of the shark beginning its assault on a surfer's legs.

In each of the texts cited throughout this paper, the key moment in the narrative is the inevitable shark attack. Described in gut-wrenching detail, the experience is relived in visceral language. However, for the purposes of the creative nonfiction poems presented here, I have sought to emulate the Gothic tropes of darkness and a kind of paranoid madness: of not knowing what is real and what is not, of ghost shapes under the water. These better represent the Gothic elements endemic to the Far North Coast, where on the surface the threat of sharks is treated as a meme, or something to mock in a cavalier fashion. Below the surface lies the actual, unseen threat, and in a place where many people have been lost to the sea (Lee, 2019), this remains a more serious and tangible representation of the Gothic.

In and around Ballina, the sea claims many lives, and the mystery surrounding these deaths adds to the sense of the Gothic that permeates the region. It also appears in the reverence with which locals regard the ocean; at once beautiful, beguiling, and dangerous. This is the focus of the next poem in the suite.

### **Aquadescence**

On a stormy Friday morning he sets out  
North of the murky mouth of the nearby river

Twin groynes channelling freshwater into the brine  
Spreading a brown bloom of flood debris into the sea

Fields of dandelions and pigface  
Shelter against the secondary dune for protection  
Black granite teeth grab at ankles  
Wading through a keyhole gap in the point  
The landscape knows the lure of the sea  
Avoids eye contact and the temptation to slip into its aquadescence

Further along the coast the ghost of a boy scours the headland  
Desperately trying to find his way home  
Lost in a cosy corner, tucked up away from view  
Stumbling up a rockface and pitching headfirst  
Into an unusually blue green sea  
Leaving only digital footprints and memories

Back at Lighthouse beach the swell chops up the horizon  
As a true waterman bodysurfs the churn  
Swimming steadily through riptides  
Ploughing through waves like a surfboat, pausing through the sets  
And knowing when to breathe big lungfuls

It's a quick skim around the headland to check conditions  
But the conditions on this day checked him  
Just one rogue moment to disappear into the deep  
And never resurface  
A quiet and unguarded instant  
A sudden stitch in time, a cramp in the continuum  
Is all it takes

The aquadescence absorbs them both  
The tourist and the local alike  
The sea doesn't discriminate when sucking you into its depths  
Swallows without remorse, like the maneaters who missed out this time  
Swim fins and a final ping from a mobile tower  
Is all that remains

Celebrated Ballina waterman Raz Burtonwood went swimming in what would be for others treacherous conditions on an overcast Friday in 2019. Equidistant between where a Japanese surfer lost his legs and his life, and where body boarder Mat Lee's legs were so ferociously mauled he almost lost them as well (Aubusson & Wood 2015), Burtonwood disappeared into the sea off Lighthouse Beach and never returned. Months before, a young Belgian man on a gap year vanished after a night out further north along the coast at Byron Bay (White, 2020).



The final trace of his steps was a signal from his mobile phone near the jagged rock face at Tallows Beach, a place renowned for rips and shark attacks and imbued with Indigenous storytelling about the dangers of the water there (Kin, 2014).

The disappearance of these two men leaves ghost-shaped figures in and around the water; speculation abounds about their fate. The title of this poem is a portmanteau of *aqua*, the colour of the surf on a clear day in Ballina, and *iridescent*, the effect the water takes on with bright sunlight. ‘Aquadescence’ attempts to capture the sensation of disappearing into a brilliant aqua void, of plunging to unknown depths and never resurfacing.

## Conclusion

The Gothic coastline of Ballina, New South Wales, Australia, evokes the sense of the uncanny via its surf culture and history of surf-related shark attacks. The unseen threat of shark attacks has been approached by many from a macabrely humorous position, in stark contrast to the reality of the outcomes of these interactions. This juxtaposition creates a rich creative jumping-off point to explore these themes in creative nonfiction poetry, highlighting the ongoing fascination and fear of surfing in shark’s territory. These poems add to the existing body of work discussing depiction of sharks in surfing culture, and Australian coastal Gothic writing.

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