



## Blowholes

Emily Wilson

There was only one road out and back from the blowholes. High on the grey saltbush hills to your left were the glaring rows of designer housing surrounded by barbed fences. By the last uphill section, if you listened close enough, you could hear the groan of the holes as the ocean thundered beneath them. Then, as you got over the crest, the slight lapse in gravity would make your stomach flip and you'd be hit by the sudden hugeness of the hills dropping away to sand dunes, rushing out to meet oil-painted white caps on a restless ocean.

And down where the whitewash churns in the underbelly of ancient rock, pushes up and is sucked back out stood Tim. Just close enough to a blowhole that its freezing mist whooshed over his feet with each grumbling surge. It had been a bloody long time since he'd been back to this spot, cut off from the main beach by a stretch of granite, but still the winds were sputtering, muttering, pouring the same incoherent chatter in his ears. He stuck his face over the hole and felt the walloping jet of air. Air from below, air that saw and had seen whatever was down there. It spoke of days and years, painting over after-images of all that had been caught up in the eddies and swirls along the now empty granite coast.

He used to know the blowholes better than anyone, still did probably. Five years holed up boarding in Perth had distorted his memory of the place, but with every rhythmic thump of the

ocean a bit of old flotsam was dredged back up into present thought. Things to untangle and ends to be tied. Instinctive steps took him and his fishing gear out to the point where the salt spray whipped thick and fast. Bait up. Rod back and forward and away, sinker flying, mind unwinding with the glistening line ...

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Images start shifting, forming and reforming, and bit by bit by bit it all came to be there. Family gatherings on that New Year's Eve way back. A soundscape grew out of the lingering shrieks of kids playing chasey in the nude, the relentless whines trying to get a dad to bowl an over, the silent splash of sisters taking on the swell headfirst to avoid recruitment in the slips; and in the background the distant blowholes creaked and moaned.

Tim wandered down to the cluster of chairs, rugs, and family on the sand where Uncle Mike was cracking on through a slab of VB. The aunts' chatter was a diminuendo in Tim's head while his dad was sucking breath through clenched teeth. Mike's maw gaped and gurgled as he told Frank to loosen the fuck up.

Dad had mentioned a cold front coming around and now that he thought about it, Tim could feel the chill starting to seep into the evening breeze, standing his arm hairs on end and making the plastic plates at dinner rattle quietly against each other. He ate Mum's potato salad, spat Aunt Jane's soggy squid rings behind him, and just stared at Mike's week-old wrinkled sausages half-wrapped in foil. Blackbodied flies buzzed around them, nesting in quivering clumps on the cold meat with no one bothering to tell them to bugger off.

'Cooked up quite a feast,' Tim said with a grin and a glance at Mum, who looked away.

'Very funny, sport.' Mike's eyes were dead above a shark smile and stone voice. Tim remembered that Mike hated embarrassment in front of the women. The silence during the rest of dinner pressed down like humid air. Tim's sisters, three volatile, puffer fish sisters just picked at the salad and nudged each other with sharp elbows and pointed looks.

Bored, bored, bored. Tim was itching for a walk. He unfolded himself from where he was sitting. Shook the sand off his bum. No one noticed him go. He headed up to the point where he didn't have to feel Mike's presence. Yeah. Forget him.

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He'd been picking paths up to the blowholes since he could walk, knew to look out two steps ahead so he didn't cut his feet or fall. A fall into one of the holes would kill you. Once, when he'd come out here after a ripper two-day storm, he'd seen a laced shoe and a square of fabric caught on the edge of one, but when he'd yelled 'Coo-eeeeeee', all that had come back was his own trembling voice carried by shooting silver spray.

The sounds used to scare him, but now he liked that they overtook his thoughts and echoed around in his brain. He would let their rhythm wash away time and place.

Tim sat with his toes curled against the rock, then, sinking with the sun flattening itself against the horizon, he lay lizard on his stomach, soaking up the earth's residual warmth. When he was smaller, his dad used to tell him the old stories about the ocean whirling around the point and under these granite ledges before thundering on up through the crevasses to meet the sky. Stories to make him shiver. About how the water had seen it all, and how she could know if you'd done good or bad in your life.

‘She’s been here a darn sight longer than you have mate, and seen a darn sight more. She’ll keep living under those holes forever, stirring about and judging those what come here.’ He’d shake his head before keeping on. ‘If you’ve done wrong in her eyes then you got nothing to live for.’

But even from his spot up on the point, wafting above the ocean’s chatter, he could hear the celebrations expanding like balloons to fill the evening, conversations caught on updrafts and threaded into space. His family had eased back into tiny uncomfortable smalltalk and among it, Mike’s words were becoming viscous, thick with drink. Half-phrases staggered along the beach, somehow making it to Tim’s ears.

‘Shit Jane, we haven’t got the pav!’ ‘Aw leave it love, it’s too late.’

‘It’s the New Bloody Year! Oi Frank, do us a favour will ya?’ ‘I’ll go.’ That was Tim’s dad, with a heavy sigh.

‘What a sport.’ Mike chuckled and sent Frank off with a clap on the back. Tim’s mum got up to follow his dad, but Mike’s arm snapped out to snag hers.

‘Nah, we’re heading over for a walk, Helen.’

‘Oh, I didn’t think ...’ Helen breathed out sharp and clear when Mike’s fingernails pressed crescent moons in to her wrist.

Then Mike was off, wading through drunken space and time, slowly, casually at first then half dragging Tim’s mum behind him. Every twist of her arm deepened those painful whitening moons. As they reached the rocks, Mike put out a palm to steady himself and cursed when it opened on the granite, letting violent crimson-turning-carmine drip out.

‘Please.’ ‘Easy, Helen.’

Tim was listening but invisible, cloaked by salt and the growing darkness. He heard a splash as Mike chucked his bottle into the water, and a smash as a wave sent it shattering

straight into the rock face. He couldn't move, body frozen and thoughts slipping, as under ether.

'Don't ...'

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A sudden tautness snapped Tim's mind back. Then, now. Something was struggling on the end of his line, just beyond reach. Now, then. But whenever he tried to put the slippery pieces together, their meanings refocused, starting to dissolve already like jellyfish in the sun.

'G'day sport.' A voice from behind, characterised and accompanied by the crunch of work boots on stone. He didn't have to turn to know who.

'How long you back in town for? Still poking your nose where it don't belong?'

Tim bit on his his tongue and tasted iron. He stood up and turned away from the ocean, the brightness in his eyes boring right through Mike's forehead while the blowhole yawned between them, ancient misgivings whirling in its depths.

It rumbled, then a geyser shot up and Tim was gone, launching through the plume of spray straight for Mike, all nails and wild fists. The edge crumbled away from beneath their feet, tipping them into the hole's in-between space; into freefall, through misted salt toward inky black noise and who knew what below. Then they were slowing, and Tim felt the water very gradually as it enclosed them, creeping pinpricks of cold clawing at his feet, thighs, chest. Metallic white seared at the backs of his eyes and even under water, he could smell Mike and his tobacco and his crusty beer-stained shirt. Tim tore at him with slow motion fingers and felt the roar of the ocean, but he wasn't scared. He knew it wasn't his time. His anger became one with the cold, then turned to needling pain,

combusting and combining and shrinking to a point, a singularity, until everything became still; wholly and numbingly clear. Blackout.

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The first sensation was an ebbing coldness, wet across his left hand. The next was sand in his mouth and between his fingers, grains crunching against molars. Sand everywhere, actually. His head hurt, and one ear was blocked until a quicksilver drop of saltwater burst and trickled out and down his neck. It was cold.

So he was back on the beach. Alone. Far enough from the point that the blowholes only whispered to him. He shifted his weight a little and let the whitewater wash him further up on the sandbank. What had happened. No, that was a lie. He knew exactly what'd happened.

Mike was gone, and in a roundabout way, so was Tim. He could have got up and started on the road home, back up the hill, where heading away from the hugeness made you feel only heavy. But he was safe here, shrouded by the chatter of the blowholes and the ocean, and occupying only that space that was necessary. Behind closed eyelids he watched eddies and swirls against the black, turning yesterday into a negative. fading fast.

You could just make him out from the top of the hill. He must have spent all night sprawled there, being gently uncovered and covered and uncovered by his blanket of ocean. The same ocean who swallows up stories, who gave the blowholes life and took deserving life in return. Behind you the sun would be just creeping over the hills, sending red-orange rays down to be caught by the water and shattered, scattered, thrown up into the air to chase the dawn. The whole picture

would rush out before you, sigh and heave as one being. And both you and Tim would feel as if you could reach out and pick a fishing-thread off the wind, out of the ocean and twist it around your fingers, but for now you must stay.