

### **The identity of place**

This is where I belong. It's my place. My country. My home.

Port Kembla beach is the place I escape to when I need to, or want to get away from the world. But, it wasn't always like that.

When I first went to the beach as a child, I hated it. It was terrifying. Crowded, huge, noisy, gritty and threatening. My family and I lived in the country where we only saw water when it rained and that didn't happen often enough. Dad was a dreamer, who had always wanted to be a farmer. He had this grand plan of keeping sheep and becoming a wealthy landowner. The problem was that Dad knew nothing about the Australian climate or farming.

Dad's landscape had been the crowded rocky cliffs of Neapolitan Italy, where his playground was the cooler room of his dad's butcher shop. Working tirelessly for 10 years in the butcher shop as an adolescent, Dad was determined to prove to himself and his family that he was able to succeed in a different country, without the long hours for little return.

In 1983, Dad was a tender 23 years of age and he found himself in Albion Park, Australia, along with 33,000 other Italian migrants who were lured to this promised land. The majority of them were from different cities of Italy, and came to this part of Australia where the steel works promised job opportunities and good pay. Even though Dad was tempted by the pay, he held fast to his dreams and spent his savings from the butcher's shop to become a farmer.

However, the great Aussie myth of being a landowner that had seduced Dad proved to be a fantasy. The weather, the science of agriculture, business management and animal husbandry were elusive skills Dad never mastered. After a couple of years of drought followed by flooding rains, Dad compromised and brought his young family to the coast and the stability of a job in industry. The harsh rural landscape had leaned on Dad and bowled him over. Its weight had broken many before him and no doubt would continue to break others in the future. The Australian landscape is still responsible for many deaths every year from floods, fires and suicide. Thankfully Dad quit before any of those things took their toll. If the landscape was the family of Dad's hopes, then his divorce from it was relatively painless.

Our new home in Port Kembla was opposite the beach. The family settled into a new lifestyle and I had the beach at my doorstep as my new playground. The only problem was that I was terrified of it. It was so unpredictable. One day it was bright blue and lapped at the sand like a puppy playing with its water bowl. Then, the next day the puppy had become an angry dog snarling and clawing at the sand and dragging it away, leaving only sharp rocks behind. I never knew what to expect and was frightened of its power and its secrets. What was hidden under the grey angry waves that pounded the sand and kept me awake at night? I was sure I could hear pirate ghosts screaming and coming to get me to find their lost treasure. All my friends

thought I had the best house, but I would have swapped with any of them very happily. The dark abyss of the night time ocean petrified me like the sound of the chopping block in the Italian cooler room had terrified my dad.

Port Kembla beach was such a long way from where we had come. A long way from Italy. I carried those places in my being, but soon the coastal landscape would be so familiar that the surf would become like family, our next generation. But at first, I was a country kid who hated the feel of sand between my toes even though I had ended up living on a prime piece of waterfront property.

Every afternoon my Dad walked with me on the beach and introduced me to the creatures living in the rockpools. My favourite were the crabs that emerged from the sand when the sea receded, scampering sideways across the beach and disappearing down a neighbour's hole as the next wave rushed in. The spiky anemones in the rock pools were fun to watch as they ate the tiny shells I dropped in on them. Like many Italian migrants, the allure of rural Australia or of coastal Australia was sufficient to leave family and lean in a southerly direction. Working with Nonno in the butcher's shop left no time for leisure except in the privacy of his dreams. Eventually the beach became a wonderland that both Dad and I looked forward to visiting every evening. It was becoming our world.

My teens were spent between school and the beach. Lots of boys wanted to be my friend because of where I lived. There was always someone to surf with. There were days when the surf was so ideal, school was redundant to my needs. My father's anger was disproportionate to his encouragement not so long ago, to actually spend time at the beach. Dad, like most migrant fathers, believed leisure was secondary to hard work and the striving for success.

All that was a long time ago and now when I think of it, it makes me laugh. The wildest thing at the beach had been my imagination.

Dad is no longer an Italian migrant. He has learned the sophistication of the possessive in English and speaks of "my beach". I now know, this is where I belong. Dad and I can never wait to change into our board shorts when we return home after time away. The beach beckons, the landscape leans in on us. No longer Italy nor the cooler room, and definitely not the farm. My dad will always be Italian but our beach has eroded his identity to a new shape. Now the Australian landscape is family also.

Port Kembla beach is our place. I escape to it whenever I need to, whenever I want to. I disappear in its landscape.