

Bodysurfing

Beauty in nature is a quality which gives the human senses a chance to be skillful.

Berthold Brecht

Sometimes while driving the coast highway back to Bowser, I notice people sitting in their cars along the ocean front parking lots of Qualicum Beach. At sunset, you're bound to find a good number of these stationary motorists, who gather there to enjoy the display of light and colors as the ocean spins away from the sun for another day.

Now my father, who was in the Navy during the last World War, knew about the other face of the ocean, one so far removed from the peaceful Qualicum sunset that he generally referred only to his time spent cutting through the black North Atlantic as "that ghastly business." But his longing for the sea was never entirely crushed, and some of my fondest childhood memories stem from the times I spent swimming and surfing with my father as he toured us about the South Pacific during his travelling years.

Those years may be gone now, but the waves are still there, still inviting, or rather daring me to take a ride. And so, I decided recently to re-live some of those moments of twinning with the sea, in this case the Pacific Ocean off the Island's mysterious West Coast.

Tofino is no Trinidad, and the water is cold. But everything else about body surfing is just as it was when I was a kid. Turned out I forgot a thing or two.

You start out by wading through the surf to about chest level, and you wait. Soon your wave approaches, glistening as it begins to curl slowly, growing larger. You make your frantic move and start swimming toward the beach. Just as you glance back the wave

is on you, lifting you high in its surly crest. But then, in an instant of terrible suspension, you realize you've miscalculated.

For now the wave you had expected to ride is riding you and it hurls you down with the seeming force of all nature. You fall, accelerating into the swirling white and green fury. Now you must hold your breath as you tumble and jar along the sandy bottom, holding the life in your lungs as the surge pounds your chest.

It goes on for a time indefinite; as the air is pummeled from your battered lungs you suspect at some point you may not last.

But soon the wave's fury is spent, its energy dispersed, even partly absorbed into your mind, and you twist with listless buoyancy to the surface in a daze, direction a mystery. A monumental gasp is followed by the expulsion of water from your nose. Then another wave rumbles whitely toward you, then knocks you down and carries you to shore, where you at last drop into the sand and wait.

You can't stay waiting there; no more than could you live in a memory. So you get up, a stark diplomat of the earth, and you look out at the sea. And there, above her, you follow her careful clouds as they drift in search of a place to die crying, replenishing the ocean and nourishing the world.