We encounter the world through surfaces: the screen, the page, our skin, the ocean's swell. Here on the sea is the surfer, positioned at the edge of the collapsing wave. And lurking underneath, in a monstrous mirroring, is the shark. When the two meet, carving along the surface, breaking through the boundary, is when death appears.

Steering her analysis from the newspaper obituary, in and out of literature, past cinema, Melissa McCarthy investigates a fundamental aspect of the human condition: our state of being between life and death, always in a precarious and watery balance. *Sharks, Death, Surfers: An Illustrated Companion* observes how sharks have been depicted over centuries and across cultures, then flips the lens (and dissects the cornea) to consider what sharks see when they look back. These refracted lines of inquiry—optical, philosophical, historical—converge at the focal point where we fix the image of the surfer and the shark. This is the picture McCarthy ends up framing: cartilaginous companions gliding together in a perfect model of how to read, navigate, and exist.

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Sharks, Death, Surfers: An Illustrated Companion Melissa McCarthy

# SHARKS DEATH SURFERS

An Illustrated Companion

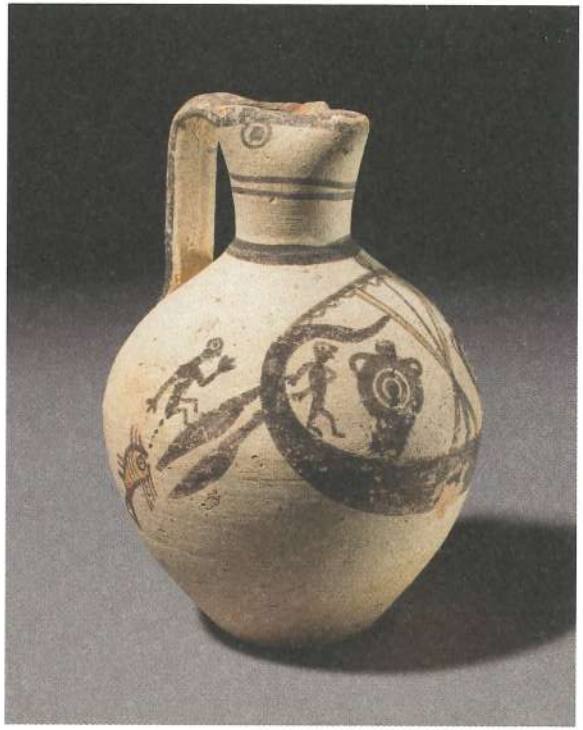
Melissa McCarthy

# *SHARKS, DEATH, SURFERS*

## *AN ILLUSTRATED COMPANION*

MELISSA McCARTHY

Sternberg Press



Wheel-made, bichrome ware vase depicting a sailor defecating into the mouth of a following shark, Cyprus, 750–600 BC. At this time, the Phoenicians were expanding their shipping networks westward over the Mediterranean, bringing with them trade, new colonies, and their alphabet.



In fact, Captain Cook's final log entry on January 17, 1779, doesn't mention surfing.

Instead he writes that Kealakekua Bay, on Hawaii's Big Island, where he had anchored his ship, the *Resolution*, was crowded with more people than he'd ever before seen assembled together in this region and that "hundreds were swiming about the Ships like shoals of fish."[2]

Cook is never the only writer recounting his voyages, and the parallel records of his companions, like in the Boswell-Johnson pairing, give a pleasantly binocular impression of the trips.[3] William Anderson, the surgeon, writes his own account. Molesworth Phillips, lieutenant of marines, writes his, as does James King, initially the second lieutenant of the *Resolution*. And surgeon David Samwell writes a brilliantly sex-obsessed running commentary on their years of travel. He mentions the Tahitian girls being outraged that recent Spanish visitors had declined their advances: "They frequently complained to us of this unmanly Behaviour of the flesh-subduing Dons. We gave them every consolation in our power."[4]



2 Philip Edwards, ed., *The Journals of Captain Cook* (London: Penguin, 1999), 605.

3 Sections of these complementary accounts are included in J. C. Beaglehole, ed., *The Journals of Captain James Cook on His Voyages of Discovery*, 6 vols. (Cambridge: Hakluyt Society, 1955–74). From this Philip Edwards prepared an edited selection, *The Journals of Captain Cook*.

4 David Samwell, in Beaglehole, *Journals of Captain James Cook*, 3:1149.

More wholesomely, Samwell has this to say about surfing in Hawaii in his diary entry dated January 22, 1779:

*As two or three of us were walking along shore to day we saw a number of boys & young Girls playing in the Surf, which broke very high on the Beach as there was a great swell rolling into the Bay. In the first place they provide themselves with a thin board about six or seven foot long & about 2 broad, on these they swim off shore to meet the Surf, as soon as they see one coming they get themselves in readiness & turn their sides to it, they suffer themselves to be involved in it & then manage so as to get just before it or rather on the Slant or declivity of the Surf, & thus they lie with their Hands lower than their Heels laying hold of the fore part of the board which receives the force of the water on its under side, & by that means keep before the wave which drives it along with an incredible Swiftness to the shore. The Motion is so rapid for near the Space of a stones throw that they seem to fly on the water, the flight of a bird being hardly quicker than theirs. On their putting off shore if they meet with the Surf too near in to afford them a tolerable long Space to run before it they dive under it with the greatest Ease & proceed further out to sea. Sometimes they fail in trying to get before the surf, as it requires great dexterity & address, and after struggling a while in such a tremendous wave that we should have judged it impossible for any human being to live in it, they rise on the other side laughing and shaking their Locks & push on to meet the next Surf when they generally succeed, hardly*



*ever being foiled in more than one attempt. Thus those People find one of their Chief amusements in that which to us presented nothing but Horror & Destruction, and we saw with astonishment young boys & Girls about 9 or ten years of age playing amid such tempestuous Waves that the hardiest of our seamen would have trembled to face, as to be involved in them among the Rocks, on which they broke with a tremendous Noise, they could look upon as no other than certain death. So true it is that many seeming difficulties are easily overcome by dexterity & Perseverance.*[5]

And James King comments on the same in March 1779:

*But a diversion the most common is upon the Water, where there is a very great Sea, & surf breaking upon the Shore. The Men sometimes 20 or 30 go without the Swell of the Surf, & lay themselves flat upon an oval piece of plank about their Size & breadth, they keep their legs close on the top of it, & their Arms are us'd to guide the plank, they wait the time for the greatest Swell that sets on Shore, & altogether push forward with their Arms to keep on its top, it sends them in with a most astonishing Velocity, & the great art is to guide the plank so as always to keep in a proper direction on the top of the Swell, & as it alters its directn. If the Swell drives him close to the rocks before he is overtaken by its break, he is much prais'd. On first seeing this very dangerous diversion I did not conceive it possible*



[5] Samwell, in Beaglehole, 3:1160.

*but that some of them must be dashed to mummy against the sharp rocks, but just before they reach the shore, if they are very near, they quit their plank, & dive under til the Surf is broke, when the piece of plank is sent many yards by the force of the Surf from the beach. The greatest number are generally overtaken by the break of the swell, the force of which they avoid, diving & swimming under the water out of its impulse. By such like exercise, those men may be said to be almost amphibious. The Women could swim off to the Ship, & continue half a day in the Water, & afterwards return. The above diversion is only intended as an amusement, not as a tryal of Skill, & in a gentle swell that sets on must I conceive be very pleasant, at least they seem to feel a great pleasure in the motion which this Exercise gives.*[6]

Both these writers are very taken by the activity that they've seen and admired. Cook, the commander of the expedition, says nothing. Nothing at all about surfing. It's almost as though he's deliberately avoiding it. Skirting around the topic. Avoiding that part of the map. Leaving it blank.



6 James King, in Beaglehole, 3:628.

Earthenware effigy vessel of a shark swallowing a human, Colima, Mexico, 100 BC–AD 250. Anthropologist Peter T. Furst suggests that the human-limbed shark is swallowing an apprentice shaman, before spitting him out with newly forged knowledge of magic, power, and language.

not just the fence surrounding the temple, but the contents of the shrine as well: little wooden carvings of the gods themselves.

Cultural exchange is often difficult and the crew experienced an escalation of misunderstandings and clashes with the Hawaiians. But it's clear that the sailors didn't understand that the fence set out a distinction between the two specific areas of inside/outside, sacred/everyday, ceremonial/practical. They didn't, as it were, read the fence properly. Instead, they burned it and raided the sanctuary.

It wasn't Cook himself, busy elsewhere glad-handing, who did this. But he was in charge and he failed to instill in his men the appropriate attitude toward the fence and the things it protected. He fell down at the boundary. Andy Martin described Cook's journey as "toward surfing; that is, toward death." I'd suggest the opposite: surfing didn't kill Cook—not-surfing did that. It was his inability to negotiate the interface between two zones—or to protect the fence between two areas—that did for him. This is what led, shortly after the fence incident, to Cook's being stabbed by an iron knife of the sort his ships had been instrumental in bringing, dead in the shallow surf.





It's worth bearing in mind here the proposition that arose from my initial discussion with Martin: that Cook ended his diary by discovering surfing, abandoning writing, and dying.

This premise, while not strictly true, is useful in two ways. First, it asserts the freedom of surfing. It's the sort of activity that could swerve a man away from the imperial regimen of classifying, claiming territory, drawing fresh maps, and systematizing the unknown. Away from a distinct world defined by external coordinates and into a particular sort of immersion and participation in that world. This isn't just about the freedom of water itself—Cook could have simply thrown himself overboard for that.

Surfing has a particular sort of freedom, the special quality of being in a privileged relationship with the boundary. The surfer is not in the water, in the air, on dry land, but a little of all of these, all at once; in a carefully controlled balance between each element. There is a useful term that we could borrow from the world of football: the surfer is a *Raumdeuter*,[12] or "space interpreter," who can make something from one realm comprehensible in another, who can negotiate between



[12] Deriving from *Traumdeuter*, or "dream interpreter," it's a phrase coined by the German footballer Thomas Müller to describe himself. See "Ich bin ein Raumdeuter," interview by Andreas Burkert, *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, January 9, 2011, http://www.sueddeutsche.de/sport/thomas-mueller-im-gespraech-ich-bin-ein-raumdeuter-1.1043798.

the two zones. The surfer understands that a boundary is not an impermeable, confining membrane, nor a simple signpost indicating a new state, but fundamentally an opportunity. It enables the surfer to slide along and enjoy the interface. This is the surfing Cook failed to do; and this omission of his is the reason that he died.

There is a second useful premise that follows from the idea that Cook might have encountered surfing and immediately abandoned his journal: surfing is the death *of writing*. This is an excellent suggestion, and it led my investigations onto the next vital element: the collision point of surfing, writing, and death, which is, of course, the surfer obituary. And this is handy for me, as I've been collecting obituaries since the 1980s.



CHAPTER 3

# *OBITUARIES— AN INTRODUCTION*

## WHAT'S YOUR VEHICLE?

So we're getting a sense of how the obituary functions and what it's for. But what is this we see lurking below the format, what are we trying to spear? It appears to be death, or a shark, or—could it be—a vehicle?

It's time to look more closely at a tool that is an essential part of the surfer's kit, or, more accurately, an essential part of the surfer: the vehicle. The surfboard, surely, a littoral type might exclaim. But no, it's not just the board but an extended web of connections that flow from it. Sometimes we'll need to exercise a bit of slippage between categories. That's okay, as the very idea of controlled slippage, he'e nalu, is at the heart of this whole investigation. But we can start by picking up the board.

## DUDE, WHERE'S MY COUNTERPART?

A surfer needs the board; it's the vehicle that allows him (in the present example) to exist as a surfer. Not just as a surfer—without a board, out on rough, open water, many humans would not make it back to shore alive. The board is the surfer's own, personal bit of solid ground that he carries with him out to sea, in the same way as an umbrella is a portable roof. An obituary—not credited, but it has to be one of Andy Martin's—of the legendary Mickey Dora (August 11, 1934–January 3, 2002),



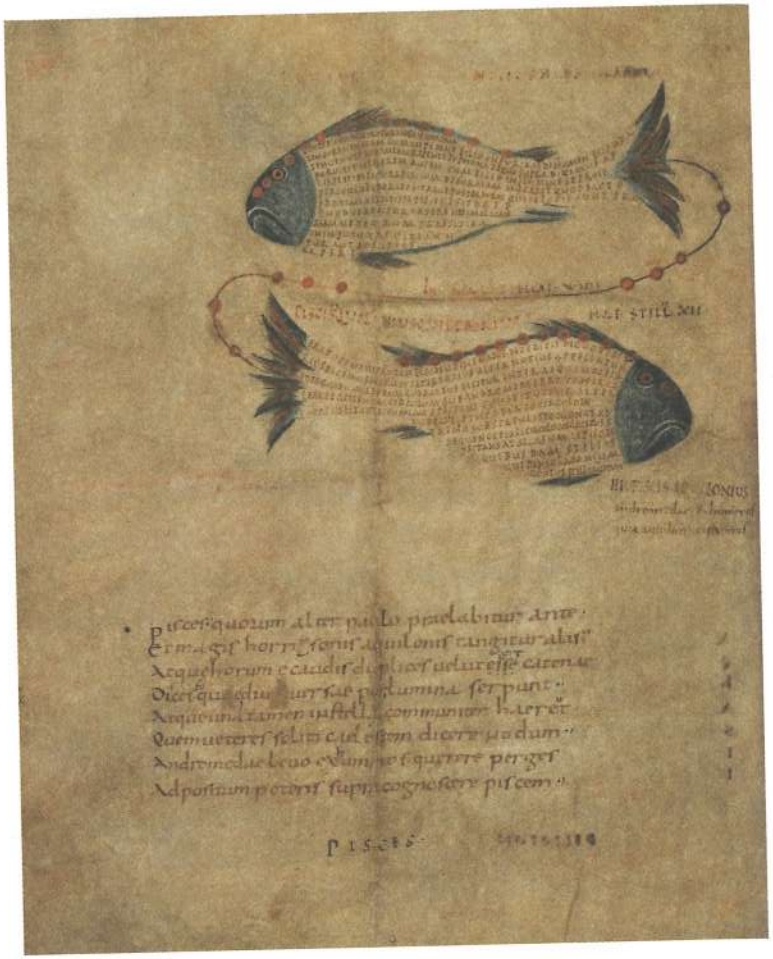
surfer, phrases it nicely: "He continued to ride his own miniature version of the Ark, on which only he would be saved."[1] Or we might think of Ishmael, the sole survivor of the *Pequod* in Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* (1851), who grabs on to the nearest carved, wooden, human-shaped item and rides it safely to shore.

But as well as a lifesaver, the board is what takes the surfer out onto the perilous water in the first place, and what might scrape him, leashed, along the coral, bang him on the head, and keep him under. The board can be either the salvation or the undoing, but in either case it can only serve this purpose by working together with the surfer. The two elements must form one unit, harnessing the conflicting forces in the right balance. One without the other is pointless, directionless, and undynamic; just a bobbing bit of balsa and polyurethane and a poor, bare, forked animal. Together, though, that's something else.

The surfer needs locational as well as compositional balance: you have to stand on the board without falling off. That leads to a simple opposition, almost too obvious to state: the surfer goes above, the board goes below—a positional balance. Then, a dynamic and grammatical one, between movement and stillness, activeness and passiveness: the surfer stays in the same place—that is, stays on the board—but the surfer *is moved* over the surface of the water. The substance (water) doesn't move, or only minimally, but the energy traveling through



1 "Mickey Dora," *Times*, January 12, 2002, 25.



Ink on parchment, a ninth-century copy of Cicero's *Aratea*, from Reims, France. In 2 BC, Marcus Tullius Cicero translated the *Phaenomena* of Aratus, who was writing two centuries earlier. In this, the earliest surviving copy of Cicero's work, the text inside the fish is from the *Astronomica* (AD 1) of Hyginus.

it certainly does. All these oppositions and balances, present at every moment of catching a wave.

This unit, the surfer-board dyad, in turn, has its counterpart, its opposite that it keeps in harmony with. And the counterpart to the surfer on the board (as we know from the article about Lew Boren) is the shark. The year after *Rolling Stone* suggests this affinity, this pairing into catastrophe, French philosopher Paul Virilio makes his strikingly similar claim that "every technology produces, provokes, programs a specific accident. [...] The invention of the boat was the invention of shipwrecks. The invention of the steam engine and the locomotive was the invention of derailments. The invention of the highway was the invention of three hundred cars colliding in five minutes."[2] He forgot to add: with every surfer comes a shark.

## IT HAS TO CONSTANTLY *MOVE* FORWARD OR IT *DIES*

There are a couple of other ways that the shark and surfer demonstrate the need for constant balance and the maintenance of tension. I've mentioned the motion versus stillness dynamic as it applies to the surfer, but for a long while biologists believed that this applied to the shark half of the pair too, and that sharks need to have



2 Paul Virilio, *Pure War*, with Sylvère Lotringer (New York: Semiotext(e), 1983), 32.

oxygenated water constantly passing over their gills so that the oxygen enters their bloodstreams. This turns out to be not always the case. Our shark expert Dr. Gruber (countering Woody Allen) informs, "Short answer—no, they do not have to be moving constantly."[3] There is a class of sharks, the obligate ram jet ventilators, who do need to be on the move almost all the time, but even these can take a break and rest in a highly oxygenated underwater cave for a while.

There is also the balance between the internal needs of the shark and its exterior. Not in the sense that humans (like Lew Boren, working as a machinist at Terra Engineering) must balance their interior desires against their social duties, but in the physical structure of the shark, and its submission to laws of weight and gravity. Gaston Bachelard (a philosopher who started out as a physicist) makes this poetic assertion: "L'être voué à l'eau est un être en vertige. Il meurt à chaque minute, sans cesse quelque chose de sa substance s'écroule."[4] Or, "The creature bound by water is a creature in vertigo. It dies at each instant; something of its substance is constantly collapsing."[5] Kief Hillsbery, in his *Rolling Stone* article, concurs: "A shark out of water



3 Gruber, "Unlocking the Mystery of Sharks (Part #1)."

4 Gaston Bachelard, *L'Eau et les rêves: Essai sur l'imagination de la matière*, 9th ed. (Paris: Livre de Poche, 2009), 13.

5 Mark Polizzotti translates the phrase, used as an epigram in Paul Virilio, *Speed and Politics: An Essay on Dromology* (New York: Semiotext(e), 1986), 37.

is a shark condemned to death. Its skin distends and its internal organs are torn apart by the effect of their own weight, which ordinarily is supported by water pressure outside the thin abdominal wall. Deprived of this support for more than the briefest period, a shark dies."[6]

The shark, just like the surfer, needs to be in its medium, maintaining equilibrium of all sorts. But this "constantly collapsing" is also a good description of the wave as it is surfed. Before it breaks, the wave is only swell: a curve over the surface of the ocean. Once the wave has fully broken and released all its pent-up energy, it's just froth, no longer any use. It needs to be in the very process of over-toppling: it's only surfable because it moves as it breaks as it exists. Sharks, and surfing, require the balancing of all these things, through time, space, through every element.

## I SOLD MY CAMPER VAN AND PADDLED OUT TO SEA

The board is the surfer's primary vehicle. But there are others. The obituary of Joe Wolfson (July 11, 1949–February 21, 2000), surfer, introduces, then overdoes, the idea of major slippage between the board and the car, as vehicles leading toward death. Wolfson was a classic Californian, bussed to school across racial-segregation



6 Hillsbery, "Shark Attack," 26.

Ink and pigment on European laid paper, depicting a fish from the Vayhah seas, from an illuminated Turkish version, illustrated and published in 1717, of Zakariya al-Qazwini's *Aja'ib al-makhluqat* (The wonders of creation), which was composed in Arabic in the mid-1200s. Al-Qazwini, a thirteenth-century scholar, is also credited with writing an early work of science fiction about an alien visiting Earth.

# SHARKS & PHOTOS

Graphic designer Germano Facetti was, among his many other accomplishments, a friend and collaborator of the French filmmaker Chris Marker. Indeed, he appears in Marker's most famous, and very Tarkovskian, film *La Jetée* (1962) in a small role as a person from the future.

The film is about a protagonist who is sent around in time, forward, back again, and back again until he comes to a moment that has a changed angle of vision. It's an event that the protagonist has seen before in childhood, but it's now viewed from a different perspective. The image that has haunted him all his life, of a man being shot, turns out to be his own death. He has been making the return, through still photography, to death.

Without direct dialogue (there is some birdsong and German muttering), *La Jetée* is told in voice-over as a third-person story, over still images. All still, that is, except one, when the beautiful, sporadically visited love interest opens her eyes from sleeping and looks out; unexpectedly and shockingly, she moves. We recognize this change—this motion—as a form of The Return. An expanse of calm, broken by explosive rupture: it's the shark-attack method of dying in the Pacific. And it's her eyes, of course. Out of the stillness of the black-and-white images, a living, mobile person was there all along, waiting to emerge. Like under every ocean, there's a shark lurking. And watching *La Jetée*, we are all confused

lemon sharks, unsure of movement, discretion, just what mode of image we're being presented with—a movie, a procession of still pictures, a catastrophic eruption, or all of these? What surface, and fabric of time, has this woman cut through?

Back at the Durban Sharks Board, they offer weekly dissection sessions, which are open to the public. At the end, you can come forward from the seating to examine and photograph (should you wish) the inert carcass. But does not every photo have a shark in it, if not in the foreground, on the slab, then at least down below, just under the surface? Like the tourist Daguerre in *Jaws* the book, glimpsing the silvered water of the shark. Like the woman in *La Jetée*, her eyes (elegantly) looming out of the stills. Like Ted Kennedy's Oldsmobile, in the police photographer's photos, almost lost beside the bridge, but not quite lost enough for him. Like all the death in every photo.

A photograph is made of lurking. The photographic paper, before it's put into the body of the camera, sits encased in a yellow box, waiting to be exposed to light. After exposure—the capturing of the image on the chemicals—the paper is held down and rocked in the tray of developer while the image emerges. Something's coming, out of the water.

Ron Stoner's vocation of surf photographer is all about this act of negotiating the surface, gliding along the balancing line between the potential and the visible. It involves: hanging about, being in place, being ready.



There's a wonderful moment in the surf documentary *Between the Lines* (directed by Scott Bass and Ty Ponder, 2008) in which a Vietnam vet, displaced from his life on the beach, describes his aptitude for patrolling through the undergrowth in hostile Southeast Asian territory. He explains that being completely attuned to your physical surroundings, minutely aware of both the visible top layer and what's hidden beneath, ready to glide over the nearest fatal situation: "That's what surfing *is*."

And if the activity of surfing (and jungle warfare) is about waiting in awareness, then surf photography is the same but to a higher degree: in place, fully kitted and prepped, lensed up, attentive, waiting for the moment when the waiting surfer offers the right line of vision for the moment of impact. Ready to snap at the body in front of you.

## WHO'S GOT THE INFO?

Bite marks, limbs missing, stab wounds, grand-jury investigations, autoptic dissection: What is it about chopping up the body that leads us back to surfing?

All these mutilated figures: Captain Cook's cook John Thompson, *Jaws*'s victim Chrissie Watkins, surfers Lew Boren and Bethany Hamilton, Senator Daniel Inouye, Captain Ahab; the ocean is a place where such things happen. But this pileup of slightly damaged people points toward dismembering as a form of

And that is why *Jaws* is a vital tool in the kitbag of any reputable obituary reviewer, along with examining photographs, looking at damaged bodies, and gathering clues from obituaries. Just as a photo works through the contrast of each pixel to its neighbors, so too with obituaries. They start to make sense through juxtaposition, contrast, and combination. It's a question of seeing what happens when you change the resolution or the angle or the rate at which you view an image. Applying different filters in order to see which frequencies start to resonate. We break things down to see the component parts, then, like Dr. Nick Otway, we start to build up the model again. It's a process of seeing the story that spreads around, out from the story. Start with one obituary, a simple text, then build up a network of looking, a habit of vision. Like Captain Cook, trying to fill in his map.

## THIS IS THE TASK

There's always a blank, and we're always shaping it. Carving it out, waxing it down, trying to work out exactly how to craft it.

Surfboard makers start with a solid slab of polyurethane (or, previously, wood), which they carve and shape. The initial object is called a "blank"; the finished vehicle is a "board." A board maker has the parameters of form (this slab, this material) and of function (the finished board has to work). It must



float when needed but be solid enough to bite; it must be mobile but not drift and slide excessively. Within these requirements, that's where the skill in shaping comes in.

Cook wrote a lovely comment on Wednesday, December 30, 1778: "In the evening the Weather cleared up, the night was clear and we spent it makeing short boards."[9] Disappointingly, this doesn't mean that he and his crew were crafting thin, maneuverable surfboards. They were tacking to and fro in the ship: heading left side into the wind, then right side, advancing in short zigzags. These journeys of discovery are never a straightforward process.

These are the tasks that propelled Cook out into the world: to claim spaces, to observe and enact returns, and to make maps. Translating real-world geography into recordable form, for retransmission and later use. Interpreting the space, moving it from the realm of the experience of travel into the sphere of artifact, version, tool. There is an existing structure, with space for him to work. He doesn't have to start from scratch, only to fill in parts of the maps that are not yet done, or done wrongly. The blank spaces. Cook is shaping the blanks and, as suspected, he is more of a surfer than he knows.

For the obituarist, the form of the newspaper obituary is the blank; it's a template of a certain size and length, requiring particular, verifiable content written in a certain register. The writer must fill this space with



9 Cook, in Edwards, *Journals of Captain Cook*, 600.

words, content. But the raw facts of the person's life—the dates, places, job, names, characteristics, numbers—these are also the blank, the raw material waiting to be shaped into the engaging story, transformed from a list into narrative. It's a balancing act, with the obituary writer being carried along by, impelled by, the true details of the person's life. You can't deviate from them, but you have to work creatively over them.

## WE HAVE LEFT THE BUILDING

Explorers, obituary writers, chiefs of police, photographers, surfers, obituary reviewers—all of us trace lines in an attempt to understand. We are beset by things that are not the case. But that's ok. We just keep in mind that this is not true. We must use the surfer's example of tracking lines over wilderness to get to vital points, and this includes identifying that the surfer operates at the vital boundary between several zones (including life/death), that the surfer has an intrinsically paired relationship with the shark (illustrating life/death), and that writing and death in particular configurations have a certain resonance (activating life/death).

That's the ocean: a vast network with lines of meaning and connection all over it, with the lurking thing that bites or gives meaning below it, and photographs come with it.



To return to Captain Cook. To return to Hawaii. To return to the shore or the shark. To return to my interview with Andy Martin. To negotiate all these elements, impediments, outcrops.

I talked to Martin for a while and then he had to leave, to go for lunch with Catherine Deneuve, or something. On my way home from our meeting, I walked through the British Museum, past the artifacts, the carved wooden totems, the sarcophagi: wooden, body-shaped vehicles. Then I thought about it further for a few years and wrote this report. It should come in handy, as a vehicle for considering different types of text, for coming at a new angle on a couple of historical car crashes. Some people might find it depressing, working from news about death, but I'm with the Hawaiians described by David Samwell, the surgeon (that is, the chief dissector and dismemberer, procreator, and healer) on Captain Cook's voyages: "Those People find one of their Chief amusements in that which to us presented nothing but Horror & Destruction."[10]

Sometimes we—Hawaiians perhaps, obituary reviewers certainly—might, as Samwell describes it, "fail in trying to comprehend the surfaces, as it requires great dexterity & address, but we try to rise on the other side laughing, & we push on to meet the next Surf, hardly ever being foiled in more than one attempt." We try to achieve The Return. It's the least we can do.



[10] Samwell, in Beaglehole, *Journals of Captain James Cook*, 3:1160.