



monkey beach

a novel



eden robinson

"Tough, tender, and fierce."

— Sherman Alexie

MARINER BOOKS

Eden
Robinson

Monkey Beach



HOUGHTON MIFFLIN COMPANY

Boston New York

2000

for Laura Robinson and Dean Hunt

*in dreams I hear you laughing and
know that you are near*



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Houghton Mifflin Company, 215 Park Avenue South,
New York, New York 10003.

Visit our Web site: www.houghtonmifflinbooks.com.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Robinson, Eden.

Monkey beach / Eden Robinson.

p. cm.

ISBN 0-618-07327-2

1. Haisla Indians—Fiction. 2. Kitimat Region (B.C.)
—Fiction. 3. Brothers—Death—Fiction. 4. British
Columbia—Fiction. 5. Indian women—Fiction.
6. Young women—Fiction. I. Title.

PR9199.3.R5334 M6 2000

823'.54—dc21 00-040782

Printed in the United States of America

QUM 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Monkey Beach



*It is possible to retaliate against an enemy,
But impossible to retaliate against storms.*

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PART ONE



Love Like the Ocean

Six crows sit in our greengage tree. Half-awake, I hear them speak to me in Haisla.

La'es, they say, *La'es*, *la'es*.

I push myself out of bed and go to the open window, but they launch themselves upward, cawing. Morning light slants over the mountains behind the reserve. A breeze coming down the channel makes my curtains flap limply. Ripples sparkle in the shallows as a seal bobs its dark head.

La'es—Go down to the bottom of the ocean. The word means something else, but I can't remember what. I had too much coffee last night after the Coast

Guard called with the news about Jimmy. People pressed cups and cups of it into my hands. Must have fallen asleep fourish. On the nightstand, the clock-face has a badly painted Elvis caught in mid-gyrate. Jimmy found it at a garage sale and gave it to me last year for my birthday—that and a card that said, “Hap B-day, sis! How does it feel to be almost two decades old? Rock on, Grandma!” The Elvis clock says the time is seven-thirty, but it’s always either an hour ahead or an hour behind. We always joke that it’s on Indian time.

I go to my dresser and pull out my first cigarette of the day, then return to the window and smoke. An orange cat pauses at the grassy shoreline, alert. It flicks its tail back and forth, then bounds up the beach and into a tangle of bushes near our neighbour’s house. The crows are tiny black dots against a faded denim sky. In the distance, I hear a speedboat. For the last week, I have been dreaming about the ocean—lapping softly against the hull of a boat, hissing as it rolls gravel up a beach, ocean swells hammering the shore, lifting off the rocks in an ethereal spray before the waves make a grumbling retreat.

Such a lovely day. Late summer. Warm. Look at the pretty, fluffy clouds. Weather reports are all favourable for the area where his seiner went missing. Jimmy’s a good swimmer. Everyone says this like a mantra that will keep him safe. No one’s as optimistic about his skipper, Josh, a hefty good-time guy who is very popular for his generosity at bars and parties. He is also heavily in debt and has had a bad fishing season. Earlier this summer two of his crew quit, bitterly

complaining to their relatives that he didn't pay them all they were due. They came by last night to show their support. One of my cousins said they've been spreading rumours that Josh might have sunk his *Queen of the North* for the insurance and that Jimmy's inexperience on the water would make him a perfect scapegoat. They were whispering to other visitors last night, but Aunt Edith glared at them until they took the hint and left.

I stub out the cigarette and take the steps two at a time down to the kitchen. My father's at the table, smoking. His ashtray is overflowing. He glances at me, eyes bloodshot and red-rimmed.

"Did you hear the crows earlier?" I say. When he doesn't answer, I find myself babbling. "They were talking to me. They said *la'es*. It's probably—"

"Clearly a sign, Lisa," my mother has come up behind me and grips my shoulders, "that you need Prozac." She steers me to a chair and pushes me down.

Dad's old VHF is tuned to the emergency channel. Normally, we have the radio tuned to CFTK. He likes it loud, and the morning soft rock usually rackets through the house. As we sit in silence, I watch his cigarette burn down in the ashtray. Mom smooths her hair. She keeps touching it. They both have that glazed, drawn look of people who haven't slept. I have this urge to turn on some music. If they had found the seiner, someone would phone us.

"Pan, pan, pan," a woman's voice crackles over the VHF. "All stations, this is the Prince Rupert Coast Guard." She repeats everything three times, I don't know why. "We have an overdue vessel." She goes on to

describe a gillnetter that should have been in Rupert four days ago. Mom and Dad tense expectantly even though this has nothing to do with Jimmy.

At any given moment, there are two thousand storms at sea.



Find a map of British Columbia. Point to the middle of the coast. Beneath Alaska, find the Queen Charlotte Islands. Drag your finger across the map, across the Hecate Strait to the coast and you should be able to see a large island hugging the coast. This is Princess Royal Island, and it is famous for its kermode bears, which are black bears that are usually white. Princess Royal Island is the western edge of traditional Haisla territory. *Ka-tee-doux Gitk'a'ata*, the Tsimshians of Hartley Bay, live at the mouth of the Douglas Channel and surrounding areas just north of the island. During land claims talks, some of this territory is claimed by both the Haisla and the Tsimshian nations—this is called an overlap and is a sticky topic of discussion. But once you pass the head of the Douglas Channel, you are firmly in Haisla territory.

Early in the nineteenth century, Hudson's Bay traders used Tsimshian guides to show them around, which is when the names began to get confusing. "Kitamaat" is a Tsimshian word that means people of the falling snow, and that was their name for the main Haisla village. So when the Hudson's Bay traders asked their guides, "Hey, what's that village called?" and the Tsimshian guides said, "Oh, that's Kitamaat." The

name got stuck on the official records and the village has been called Kitamaat ever since, even though it really should be called Haisla. There are about four or five different spellings of Kitamaat in the historical writings, but the Haisla decided on Kitamaat. To add to the confusion, when Alcan Aluminum moved into the area in the 1950s, it built a "city of the future" for its workers and named it Kitimat too, but spelled it differently.

If your finger is on Prince Rupert or Terrace, you are too far north. If you are pointing to Bella Coola or Ocean Falls, you are too far south. If you are pointing in the right place, you should have your finger on the western shore of Princess Royal Island. To get to Kitamaat, run your finger northeast, right up to the Douglas Channel, a 140-kilometre-long deep-sea channel, to its mouth. You should pass Gil Island, Princess Royal Island, Gribbell Island, Hawkesbury Island, Maitland Island and finally Costi Island. Near the head of the Douglas, you'll find Kitamaat Village, with its seven hundred Haisla people tucked in between the mountains and the ocean. At the end of the village is our house. Our kitchen looks out onto the water. Somewhere in the seas between here and Namu—a six-hour boat ride south of Kitamaat—my brother is lost.

My mother answered the phone when the Coast Guard called. I took the phone from her hands when she started crying. A man told me there had been no radio contact since Saturday, two days earlier. The man said he'd like to ask me a few questions. I gave him all the information I could—that Jimmy had phoned

us from Bella Bella on Friday. He told us that 36 hours' notice had been given for a Sunday opening for sockeye salmon in Area 8. Josh had been planning to move the seiner closer to his favourite Area 8 fishing point. No, I didn't know where the point was. Jimmy had said that since it was a boring sit-and-wait kind of job, the crew was splitting up. The three senior fishermen in Josh's crew were staying in Bella Bella and taking a speedboat to join the *Queen* early Sunday. Jimmy had the least seniority so he had to go with Josh.

The man told me that Josh had called his crew in Bella Bella to say the engine was acting up so he was stopping over in Namu. When the crew arrived at the Area 8 fishing site, they couldn't find the *Queen of the North*. They searched all afternoon. No one in the fishing fleet reported seeing the *Queen*. No one knew if she'd gone down or if she'd just broken down and was holed up somewhere. Area 8 was large, the man said. There had been no mayday, but he didn't say if this was a good or a bad thing. Did I know of anything else that could be helpful? No, I said. It wasn't really a lie. What I knew wouldn't be particularly useful now.



There are no direct flights to Namu from the Terrace-Kitimat Airport, so Mom and Dad are traveling to Vancouver on the morning flight. From there, they're flying into Bella Bella and then going by boat to Namu to be closer to the search. I shouldn't have told them about the crows. At least I didn't tell them about the dream: the night the *Queen of the North* disappeared, I

saw Jimmy at Monkey Beach. He stood at the edge of the sand, where the beach disappeared into the trees. The fog and clouds smeared the lines between land and sea and sky. He faded in and out of view as the fog rolled by. He wore the same clothes he'd had on the day he left, a red plaid shirt, black jeans and the John Deere baseball cap Dad had given him. I must have been on a boat, because he was far away and small. I couldn't see his face.

When we were kids, Dad would tell us about B'gwus, the wild man of the woods. They were stories that Ba-ba-oo had told him. Jimmy's favourite was the one where these two trappers go up into the mountains near Monkey Beach. At one point, they had to separate because the trail split. They put a Y-shaped stick at the crossroads. The trapper who finished his line first would point the stick in the direction of their camp.

The first guy who finished checking the traps heard something big moving in the bushes ahead of him. He caught a glimpse of light brown fur through the leaves and thought it was a grizzly. Keeping his gun pointed in the direction of the shaking bushes, he left the trail, moving backwards as quietly and quickly as he could, thinking that if he stayed downwind, it wouldn't notice him.

So he wasn't paying attention to what was behind him when he broke into a clearing. He heard a grunt. He spun around. In front of him were more than twenty very hairy men. They looked as surprised as he was. They were tall, with thick brown hair on their chests, arms and legs. Their heads were shaped oddly, very large and slanted back sharply from the brow.

One of them growled and started towards him. He panicked and bolted back into the bushes, and they began to chase him.

They were fast. He was quickly cornered at the foot of a cliff. He climbed up. They gathered at the bottom in a semicircle and roared. When they followed him up, he raised his gun and, knowing he'd probably have only one shot, picked the leader. The trapper shot him in the head, and the creature landed with a heavy thump at the bottom of the cliff. As the other sasquatches let out howls of grief, the trapper ran.

After he reached the beach and realized that no one was following him, he made his way back to camp. His partner wasn't there. The sun was setting, and the trapper knew that he was going to have to wait until morning before he could go after him.

He broke camp, put all the stuff into their boat, anchored out in the bay and spent the night wide awake. At first light, he headed up the mountain. When he got to the crossroads, he saw his partner, battered, bloody and most definitely dead. Before he could get to him, the howling started all around, and he turned and ran.

"You're telling it wrong," Ma-ma-oo had said once when she was over for Christmas dinner. Every time Dad launched into his version, she punctuated his gory descriptions with, "That's not how it happened."

"Oh, Mother," he'd protested finally. "It's just a story."

Her lips had pressed together until they were bloodless. She'd left a few minutes later. Mom had kissed Dad's nose and said family was family.

Ma-ma-oo's version was less gruesome, with no one getting shot and the first trapper just seeing the b'gwus crossing a glacier, getting scared and running back to the camp. Me and Jimmy liked Dad's version better, especially when he did the sound effects.

Either way, when the trapper got back to the village, he had an artist carve a sasquatch mask. At the end of the story, Dad would put on a copy that his father had carved and chase us around the living room. Jimmy would squeal in mock terror and pretend to shoot him. If Dad caught us, he'd throw us down and tickle us. Ma-ma-oo frowned on this. She said it would give us nightmares. Sure enough, Jimmy would crawl into my bed late at night when he thought I was asleep and curl into my side. He'd leave before I awoke, tiptoeing out.

Jimmy took the story as if it were from the Bible. He bought himself a cheap little camera one day, and I asked him why he was wasting his money.

"I'm going to make us rich," he said.

I snorted. "How? You going to blackmail someone?" I'd been watching soaps with Ma-ma-oo and knew all about cheating husbands and wives who were photographed in awkward positions.

Jimmy shook his head and wouldn't tell me. "Want it to be a surprise."

All that week, he begged Dad to take him to Monkey Beach.

"How come?" Dad said, getting annoyed.

"Because that's where the b'gwus are," Jimmy said.

Dad raised an eyebrow.

Jimmy squirmed. "Please, Dad. Please. It's important."

"Jimmy," Dad said. "Sasquatches are make-believe, like fairies. They don't really exist."

"But Ma-ma-oo says they're real," Jimmy said.

"Your grandmother thinks the people on TV are real," Dad said, then glanced at me, rolling his eyes. After a moment, he leaned in close to Jimmy, whispering, "You don't really want to get eaten, do you? They like little boys."

Jimmy went pale. "I know." He looked at me. I rolled my eyes upward.

Only when it looked like Dad wasn't going to give in did Jimmy pull out a copy of the *World Weekly Globe*. He showed us page 2, where it said that the *Globe* would pay up to thirty thousand dollars to anyone who got a picture of a sasquatch.

"We'll be rich!" Jimmy said, so excited he began to hop. "We can go to Disneyland! We can get a new car! I bet we could even get a new house!"

Dad stared at him. He patted Jimmy's shoulder. "If you finish all your chores this week, we'll leave on Friday."

Jimmy whooped and ran to tell Mom. I giggled. He was only a year and a half younger than me and he was still such a baby.

"Well," Dad said with a wry smile, "cockle season's starting anyway."

Dad's uncle Geordie and his wife, Edith, dropped off equipment for the trip that night. Jimmy was furious that they were coming with us until they both promised that he was the only one that would be taking pictures. They were, Uncle Geordie assured him, coming along only for the cockles.

We left early Saturday morning. It took forever to get going. Me and Jimmy watched cartoons while Mom made herself up in the bathroom. She never left the house without at least wearing lipstick, and even though no one was going to see us, she got up extra early to do her hair and makeup. Dad was adamant that when we built our new house, she'd get her own bathroom.

I poured myself some Puffed Wheat and pushed them around my bowl, feeling time crawl slowly across my skin, an agonizing eternity of waiting for Mom to get ready. She finally came downstairs in carefully pressed jeans, a white shirt and jean jacket, and with a blue kerchief over her hair. Dad wiped his hands on his pants before he kissed her good morning and said she looked great.

At the docks we had to wait for Aunt Edith, who was bringing fresh bread. Mom had mortally offended her a few months earlier by buying her a bread machine for Christmas. Dad tried to warn her, said she'd appreciate an electric knife a lot more, but Mom insisted because she knew Aunt Edith's arthritis was getting worse. Just recently, she'd had to cut her long hair into a bob because she couldn't braid it any more. Uncle Geordie conceded that Edith did use the machine for the kneading part, but everything else was still done the old-fashioned way. Her bread was absolutely the best: cotton-ball soft inside, so tender the butter almost made it dissolve, with a crust as flaky and golden brown as a croissant's. Mom later got back in her good books, at Ma-ma-oo's birthday party, by baking a slightly tough, heavy loaf and then casually asking what Aunt Edith thought she'd done wrong.