

Corrigan Sandblow

Fraser Island

Fraser Island is one of those places that are quite magical in their own uniquely Australian way. I spent seven sun-kissed days there last summer. I had no expectations of the week, apart from wanting time to rest and reflect, which was probably just as well, for I could never have imagined how significant the experience would be. It was a time outside of ordinary time, in a place where extraordinary natural beauty dwarfed the concerns of everyday life. It required no effort on my part to forget about work and to immerse myself in the island and its stories.

The legends of the Budjala people tell how Beiral, the great sky god, created all the people and then called upon Yendingie and his helper, the Princess K'Gari, to create the sea and the land. K'Gari fell in love with the magnificent world they made, and asked Yendingie if she could stay forever, but he refused because K'Gari was a spirit and did not belong in this world. K'Gari begged and pleaded until eventually Yendingie agreed to let her stay, but she could not remain in spirit form, so Yendingie changed her into a beautiful island of sand. Today K'Gari spends her time happily lying on her back looking up at the sky. The Aboriginal people named this island K'Gari, after the beautiful princess; it means "paradise".

Science tells us that the island was conceived eons ago, when the tablelands of northern New South Wales were eroded by the great rivers. The sandy soil was carried north on the ocean currents, until it came to rest behind the rocky outcrop that is now Indian Head, gradually building up over millennia to form the mighty sand island we know as Fraser Island.

It didn't really matter to me which version of the island's origins was "true". It was a paradise of crystal clear streams, still lakes, dense forests, open wallum heathland and wide sandy beaches. Goannas, wallabies and dingos wandered freely, evoking mixed responses from humans. Bird song filled the air at sunrise and sunset, and at night the Milky Way splashed a starry arc across the sky.

We camped on the eastern side, below the Corrigan Sandblow, one of many places where the island's sands are continually being swept inland by the wind, and shaped into huge white mountains. At dawn on the first morning I walked towards the sandblow, through the dim archway of interlaced branches, treading lightly on the earth, avoiding the ant trails, the spiders' webs, and the tender plants along the track.

I emerged into a landscape both majestic and mysterious. Giant hills of glistening sand rose dramatically before me, layer upon layer, climbing higher and higher, swallowing up the forest before them, moving inexorably on. The upper slopes were bare, devoid of vegetation. Half way up, the dunes were studded with the bleak, black skeletons of trees drowned long ago by sand, and now being slowly exhumed by the wind. On the lower slopes small shrubs were emerging, as the forest gradually reclaimed its territory.

The surface of the sand was blown into a million ripples, like the pattern left by a receding tide, or the bed of a forest stream. Huge winged dunes crossed the sandy hills, their edges moving forward faster than their centres, crescent moons endlessly striving for fullness. It was a magical landscape. Metre upon metre of sand lay beneath my feet. Down, down, down, far below sea level. Down, down, down to the sandy depths. Formed

from the sands of the sea; built upon the forest; shaped by the wind; washed by the rain; it was a place of wonder and of mystery.

With the dawn, this sandy world was born anew, emerging slowly from the darkness, rinsed and refreshed by showers in the night, smoothed and swept clean by the wind, gently warmed by the sun as she rose from her watery bed.

My footprints stood out starkly on the blank canvas of sand, only to disappear behind me, their edges softening and blurring as drifting sand filled the indentations. Wave upon wave of sand swept up the slopes. It penetrated my clothing, infiltrated my hair, exfoliated my exposed skin. I sat with my back to the wind. The sand eddied and swirled around the obstruction until it found a new path forward. I trickled the sand through my fingers. It fell delicately, fanning out like a bridal veil in the breeze.

In that very special place I was conscious not only of immense beauty and awe-inspiring power, but also of wholeness, of completeness. It was a place where the wonder of nature was revealed in, and through, the four elements: in the water, whose beauty and benevolence could be seen in the silvery shimmer of the ocean on the horizon and in the moist, freshly washed sand before me; in the fire, whose energy shone in the brilliance of the sunrise and could be felt in the warmth on my skin; in the earth body which lay beneath my feet, in the sand, the shrubs and the trees; and in the air which swirled and blew around me.

At that moment the massive heap of sand on which I stood felt like the centre of the universe. The world seemed to be encompassed in what I could see and feel from my elevated vantage point. In the fourteenth century Julian of Norwich had a mystical vision of a hazelnut lying in the palm of her hand; she understood this to represent "all that is made". Seven hundred years later, my experience on the sandblow echoed this. I was aware of the microscopic and the macroscopic: of water, fire, earth and air; of land and sky; of world, universe and cosmos; of all that is.

My treasured Oxford dictionary tells me that the cosmos is "the universe seen as a well-ordered whole". What an appropriately medieval concept! It conjures up images of *mappae mundi*, those elaborate illustrated maps from the European Middle Ages which superimpose diagrams and (often whimsical) sketches of the natural world and human history onto a schematic geographical background. These idiosyncratic maps are designed to represent the harmony and order of both the natural and divine worlds. I remember my delight when I first saw the thirteenth century *mappa mundi* in Hereford Cathedral: the intricacy of the illustrations; the complexity of the tales encoded in the delicate blocks of text; the vivid black, gold and red lettering; the blue and green water (apart from the Red Sea, which was – with medieval logic – coloured red!).

What I felt on the towering sand dune that morning was an order like that signified in a *mappa mundi*, a harmony that was both of this world and beyond. How could it be otherwise, when earth, sea and sky combined to such magnificent effect? As I stood alone on that awe-inspiring mountain of sand, like Julian of Norwich in her solitary anchorage I was confident that "all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well".

I returned to the sandblow that evening. The sun was dropping rapidly, as if anxious to extinguish herself in the sand. The dunes were tired, crisscrossed by footprints, marked by the busyness of the day, waiting for the stillness of the evening and the gentle cleansing touch of rain in the night.

I had loved the silence and stillness of the early morning, the pristine beauty of the unmarked sands. It was my ideal world, a peaceful, harmonious place free from the stresses and tensions that are an inevitable part of the human condition, a space to contemplate the mysteries of the universe. Yet here before me was evidence of the passage of humanity, and of the diversity of approaches to this place and, perhaps, to life: the careful, measured imprints of the reflective walker; the sharp, deep-dug marks of the jogger; the untidy hand prints of children; the intertwined hearts of lovers; the compacted shapes of buttocks at rest; the crazy sand-drawn patterns of people at play; the overlay of footprint upon footprint, as of massed humanity.

The interactions of human with human, and of human with nature, were inscribed on the sand. Connections and interconnections. It was not well-ordered; it was dishevelled and disordered. It was a bit like life: less than perfect, not always tidy, ever in motion, with layer upon layer of meaning shifting and changing.

Despite the busyness of the human-marked sand, the beauty of the place soothed my heart, and I felt again the awe and wonder of the morning, but in a subtly subdued form. At dawn my heart had lifted with the rising sun; as the light faded at dusk (and the myriad patterns in the sand softened in intensity) I felt the peace and tranquillity that comes with the velvety transition from light to dark. And the evidence of human presence added a subtle new depth to the experience.

Sunrise and sunset are liminal times. At sunrise I had hovered on the brink of a numinous world. At sunset I stood at the centre of a populous story. The *mappa mundi* inscribed on the Corrigan Sandblow that evening depicted a multiplicity of journeys that were very human in both origin and design.

As I walked barefooted on the rapidly cooling sand, my feet trod upon the marks made by earlier visitors, stepped into the shapes of other feet. My toes pressed into the moulds made by other toes, in an intimacy that was both anonymous and deeply personal. It was an unsought "oneness" that challenged my preference for the natural world rather than human company. One with the sand, one with the sea and the sky, with the breeze and the emerging stars. One with the people who had walked, run, sat and played on the sandblow that day.

I strolled back to the camp site slowly, through the deepening shadows, beneath the twinkling of the first tiny stars, stopping to pick up the detritus of the day: one small pink ribbon, one solitary sandal, a crushed soft drink can, a tatty old ball. The day's leavings thoughtlessly discarded or ... perhaps ... evidence of a light-hearted day, of frivolous fun, of memories 'cumulated, of people at play.

Like a Rubin optical illusion where you can see either one vase or two faces, perhaps there is another way to view the much-marked sand: not as a canvas spoiled by humans, but as a creative endeavour, a painting fresh-drawn. Each day brings a new surface, a free gift of nature, that awaits the stories to be written, drawn and trod onto it.

That night we went to a performance by the local Aboriginal people at the K'Gari Cultural Centre. We joined the other visitors around a camp fire and were treated to a celebration of the island and its history in dance and song. Unlike the either/or of the Rubin illusion, or the human/nature dualism of my experiences earlier that day, there was no then/now distinction in the stories we heard and saw. For the Aboriginal people who entertained us that night this was a living history. As the children danced in studied

imitation of the adults, as the adolescent boys leapt and swooped with youthful exuberance, as the adults narrated the story of the Princess K'Gari, they were participating, once again, in the birth of the island, writing its story - and their story - on the sand anew. Just as my story - and multiple other stories - had been inscribed on the Corrigan Sandblow that day.

- Patricia Rose -