

The Sandcarver

Erin Tatlow

Some mornings my beach is surprisingly crowded, even before sunrise. Whenever the surf is good I can make out black silhouettes far out past the rock islands, where the waves are fierce and the humans fragile. Always there are joggers, many with dogs, feet pounding with the rhythm of the breakers. And sometimes, during school holidays, the children in the seafront holiday houses race down to the shore at first light, to splash and scream and watch the sun climb sluggishly above the horizon.

And there's me, too. I've been here for a very long time. Today I mount the dunes and stand among the grasses, feeling the salty breeze and the weak sun trickle across my face. I smile as a group of holiday children, maybe six or seven of them, rush down to the water's edge to jump the waves, squealing as the seabirds swoop them playfully. Yes, this is my beach, it always has been. But I'm willing to share it with the surfers, the joggers, and the tourists. In fact, I count on them almost as much as I count on the beach itself.

I leave the dunes and walk further down the beach, where the sand is firmer. It is low tide, the best time to begin. I choose a suitably flat patch of sand and mark out a large square with my trowel. A boundary is always important, I find; keeps the passers-by from intruding and also stops me from getting too carried away. I have a tendency to do that, if I don't restrict myself. Sounds odd, I know, seeing as art shouldn't ever be restricted, but it works for me — I like the element of control I have over what I do.

I start by packing down the sand within my square — first stamping hard with my feet, and then pressing down more gently and smoothing with my hands. A good base is essential in keeping everything firm and sturdy, a lesson relative to life itself as well as sandcarving. A passing jogger calls out a greeting, and I lift my hand in acknowledgment. He's a local and I see him every Saturday, although I don't know his name. What I do know is that later on in the day he'll be back here, with his young daughters, eager to see the finished piece. But what should I carve today? I smile to myself as an idea comes to me. Yes, perfect.

I'm building up a pile of sand, now. My trowel may be small but it digs deep, and soon I have enough sand for the beginnings of a sculpture. I add a few scoops of seawater until it's just the right consistency — moist enough to be moulded, yet dry enough to hold its shape on its own. I scoop it into a mound and, finally, begin to sculpt it. I want to make sure it's perfect. I have to stop every now and then to shoo the inquisitive seagulls away — I don't want their footprints all through my work — but with patience my sculpture is soon waist-high.

I pause to stretch my back and notice that the beach has become busier. Families with children and groups of teenagers claim spaces on the sand; men carrying fishing poles head towards the rocks; bodies bronze slowly in the dazzling sun. My half-finished sculpture is attracting attention now — the children are pointing and staring excitedly. Most of them are locals and know that where I am, something pretty will soon appear; they take great delight in guessing what the finished product will be. They never speak directly to me ± I think I might frighten them a little — but their shrill voices carry on the breeze: an elephant, a pirate ship, a mermaid. I smile as I collect more water in my cupped hands, sprinkle it over my work and pat it down. The sand dries out quickly in this hot sun.

It's close to midday and I'm nearly finished. A crowd gathers as I finish the detailing — the soft curls of the hair, the wrinkles in the clothing, the contours of the face. I gently

deepen the grooves in the bent elbow with my little finger. The children have ceased their chattering and watch in silence. I spy the jogger I saw earlier at the front of the crowd, a daughter on each arm, brimming with anticipation. There are the holiday children, who have been at the beach since first light. Even the surfers have paused their paddling and are gathered in the shallows as I put the finishing touches on my sculpture.

I stand up. My knees and back ache from crouching for so long. I walk around my sculpture once, twice, three times. Lovingly I stroke its cheek and blow loose sand from its face — a face I knew so well. I then nod, satisfied, and step back. It's finished. The crowd moves in to look at what I have made.

It is a woman, cross-legged, staring out to sea. Her chin rests in her hands, her face wistful. The curly hair, so delicate, tumbles gently down the curved back. The toes are just visible, poking out from under the flowing skirt. The people sigh and marvel at the beauty of sand. Look at her hair ... She's so pretty ... I wonder who she is?

I discreetly place my hat upside down on the ground. As they leave, one by one the people each drop a coin into it. More precious than that are the kind words of praise and gratitude. I love that what I do makes people so happy, because it makes me happy too. It's nice to know that I can do something to remember the people whom have made my life special. Reflections of the beauty and impermanence of humanity — as true to life, my cross-legged woman will soon melt away with the tide. I scoop up my hat, pocket my trowel and take one last look before I walk away.



Erin Tatlow wrote this in 2010 when he was in Year 12 at Lavalla Catholic College in Victoria.