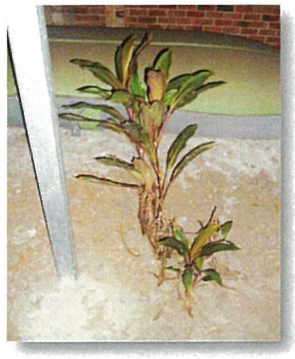
Rosemary Stride

Transplanted



There is a plant growing in the builder's rubble under our house. It is a *Cordyline Fruticosa;* native to South East Asia and Papua New Guinea but now common in Australia. According to care manuals, these plants need to be kept moist, should be fertilised every six months, and need some sunlight if the leaves are to achieve their full colour. Mature plants produce yellow or red flowers. The fruits are red berries.

Over time they expand into clumps by suckering.

Even on the brightest days, it is still twilight down amongst the house stumps. The only source of moisture is what seeps down the slope from the front lawn; what is left when the Poinciana trees have slaked their thirst. What soil there is consists of grey gravel and sand, with a liberal sprinkling of stones and broken bricks. The only fertiliser sits in a plastic crate, reserved for the garden proper.

I first noticed this solitary plant a month after we moved in, but when I announced my intention to pull it out, my son objected.

"Mum," he argued. "Any plant game enough to try and establish itself down there deserves to live."

Five years later it is still there. It has grown a little, but not much. Its strappy leaves have the complexion of chronic disease. They should be glossy, with purple, pink, red or white stripes, but these are dull, dusty, grey. From time to time suckers emerge at the base, but soon wither to pale straw. I have never seen a flower or anything resembling red berries. Quite simply, it doesn't belong there. It can survive, just, but cannot thrive. Clinging to meagre sustenance from the poor soil, eventually it will shrivel and die.

'Belonging'. Dictionaries provide various definitions. Most encompass feeling connected to a place, a family, a group of friends or a specific community. Such a sense of belonging is believed to be crucial for emotional and psychological wellbeing. According to Maslow's 'Hierarchy of Needs', a secure sense of belonging is a prerequisite for personal growth and accomplishment. In the words of Simone Weil, "To be rooted is perhaps the most important and least recognised need of the human soul."

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Stretching out low and dark on the horizon east of Brisbane, North Stradbroke Island is the second largest sand island in the world. To the north, across a narrow, turbulent strait, rise the white sand blows of Moreton Island. Together they cradle the turquoise hues of Moreton Bay, sheltering the mainland coast from the relentless swells of the Pacific. The Quandamooka people have always known that they belong here, but have had to struggle to prove it. On at least ten occasions since 1916 they have tried to gain legal recognition of their longstanding relationship with the land and water. Now, on Monday 4 July 2011, sixteen long years since their most recent claim was made, they are hopeful of a positive outcome. Our daughter is the leader of the State legal team. They have worked long and hard to achieve this native title determination, so we too have an interest in Monday's special sitting of the Federal Court in Dunwich, the main township on North Stradbroke Island.

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The author, her husband and grandson on Stradbroke Island.

Like the *Cordyline Fruticosa* under my house, most of us in Australia originated from elsewhere. That is, unless we are indigenous Australians. Most Aborigines see themselves as living in a symbiotic relationship with the land they occupy, rather than owning it - a distinct contrast with the colonists' view where the land was, and still is, to be exploited for wealth and status. Witness the recent heated debates about mining taxes. And so the concept of 'terra nullius' – land belonging to no-one – coined in the early years of white occupation, highlighted the differing value systems of the newcomers and the original inhabitants, and was enshrined in law. Kath Walker, the renowned poet and activist, was a member of the Noonuccal clan, one of three which make up the Quandamooka people of Moreton Bay. In later life she chose the name 'Oodgeroo', which means paperbark, thereby linking herself to the trees which abound on North Stradbroke Island where she was born. In her opinion, 'terra nullius' was a 'lie' that alienated her people from their country. Thanks to the efforts of Eddie Mabo, the concept was overturned in 1992, and the native title legislation, which followed the Mabo Decision, set out to redress that sense of alienation.

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Clanking onto the vehicle ferry. It is a forty-minute trip across the bay to the island, affectionately referred to as 'Straddie' by locals. The Aboriginal name is Minjerribah. The deep-water channel is narrow as you leave the mainland, wending its way through the shallow, muddy waters that lap the crouching mangroves; The lethal flotsam of modern life is tangled in these tidal margins. Plastic bottles, car tyres, twisted fishing line. Spongy pneumatophores puncture the soft mud; pencils trying to breathe. But as the ferry reaches deeper water, brown gives way to murky green, then opalescent blue, and the smaller islands of the bay come into view. Coochiemudlo and Macleay to the south, Peel Island to the north. Straddie awaits us in

the east, a lizard lounging in the sun, its dark green spine slashed by a sandy scar – a mining wound. White-bellied sea eagles cruise effortlessly overhead. The wind picks up as the ferry moves across the water, teasing the ripples into frills of white lace. Sails dot the bay, catching the sun as they tack back and forth.

We arrive at Dunwich, a small township towards the north of the island which faces the mainland to the west – from whence the ferries come. It is the main settlement, where the court will sit on Monday, but we are staying at Home Beach, on the outskirts of Point Lookout, twenty kilometres to the north-east. Here, a sandy path through a narrow strip of melaleuca forest leads to the beach. White trunks lean across the track, wads of pale grey paperbark peeling earthwards, anchoring vines that shroud the trunks in net curtains. Bracken ferns brush our ankles as we emerge onto a strip of pristine white sand, north facing which protects us from the cool westerlies. To our surprise, a small white marquee stands in front of us on the sand, a strip of crimson carpet linking it to the track. Whilst we collect shells on the water's edge and build sandcastles with the grandchildren, a wedding is taking place. Traditional white dress, dark suits, a tiny white flower girl. But the bridesmaids wear black. No-one wears shoes. A happy union of the old and the new - the natural and the man-made.

The bride appears, from a distance, to be of Asian descent. One cannot be sure. Yet she has chosen a quintessentially Australian landscape for this significant event in her life. Her imprint is light. It shows respect. There is nothing to harm the beauty of the forest or the beach. The marquee, red carpet and paper lanterns marking the path are folded and removed when the ceremony is done. The rhythmic waves, background music throughout, reassert their dominance. If this has not always been her home, it seems she has grown to love it. Like many migrants, she seeks to bind herself to it through life's rituals. But it takes time to acquire the deep roots, reaching down through the soil into the rocky substratum of history, which bind the Quandamooka people to this place. On Monday, there should be recognition of that relationship with the land.

But on Sunday we wake to rain. The venue for the historical event is a sportsground which sits low, sandwiched between a narrow beach and a steep slope crowned with Norfolk pines. Drainage could be better. Marquees have already been erected, but water will be pooling on the roofs and they aren't big enough to shelter everyone. And a jumping castle has been planned. There is no alternative venue. It continues to rain on and off during the night. My daughter doesn't sleep much.

To our surprise Monday dawns as one of those perfect Queensland winter days when the blue of the sky merges seamlessly with the deeper blue of the bay. Not a breath of wind stirs even a wisp of cirrus or white cap to mar the canvas. Nature provides the perfect backdrop, but seems to be holding its breath in unison with the claimants and their legal representatives; apprehensive until the judgement is finally handed down. Waiting outside the Public Hall, on the hill above the ferry terminal, we watch as the barges disgorge vehicles and families, and helicopters whir over the sports oval carrying government officials to the helipad. The sun

grows hotter. The glare is more intense from a foil sea. Sprays of white bottlebrush, marking indigenous oneness with this land, double as fans.

Red brick, green corrugated iron roof, a wide verandah sheltering wooden doors and tall casements on the eastern aspect, Dunwich Public Hall is a solid building – a permanent fixture unlike the sapling and bark gunyahs of the first inhabitants. A monument to the European presence on this island, it was built in 1913 as the mess hall for The Benevolent Asylum. Finally, at about 10.45 am, we are allowed in. There is nowhere near enough room. Later we learn that over eight hundred people tried to cram themselves into a hall big enough for half that number. People stand around walls tiled to about four feet in institutional pale green – an original feature chosen for easy cleaning. Above the tiles, cream rendered brick rises impressively to at least fifteen feet. A much younger version of the Queen looks down on the proceedings. At the front the solicitors and barristers sit with their backs to us, behind a long table in front of the stage: a dividing line of black gowns and dark suits crowned with grey or dark hair, suitably restrained. Most of them are men. My daughter is in the centre, her blonde, shoulder-length hair conspicuous against the grey-green of her suit jacket. The colour reminds me of melaleuca leaves - a fortuitous choice.

There is much scuffling of feet on the narrow strips of hardwood floor. Men, women, and children of many different races peer in through doors and windows, or climb onto the kitchen hatches at the back. An Aboriginal lady kindly allows my granddaughter to stand on the back of her chair, so that the six-year old can see her mother at the front. Behind my daughter a woman sits with a shock of white hair standing out like fairy floss. Bonita Mabo has flown down from the Torres Strait to see her husband's legacy in action. Her presence upstages that of the Queen.

The judge enters. Instantly all is still. Silence, taut as a drawn bow, fills the hall. Small children do not cry or fidget on their mothers' laps. Eyes are fixed on the front of the hall, on a table beneath the heavy brick-red velvet curtains of the stage. The tension holds throughout the reading of the judgment; an interesting, but lengthy speech. Evidence of indigenous occupation going back at least 20,000 years; Flinders' first impressions of the Aborigines he met in 1803; family trees linking those alive today with those on the island in the early 1800s. Evidence of belonging, but also of foreign occupation and alienation. Smallpox epidemics, leprosy, the mission at Myora just north of Dunwich – a government name imposed on a site the indigenous people called Moongalba, their 'sitting down place'. Finally, the words they've all been waiting for. Words to reconnect them with their country: "I make the orders set out in the drafts which I now initial and place with the papers. Those orders recognise the Quandamooka People's native title interests within the Australian legal system and extend the protection of that system to these rights and interests... in doing so I bind all people for all time."

The determination is made.

"All rise." And they do. As one. The judge disappears behind a screen and the bow is released. Clapping, cheering, tears, laughter, hugs, kisses, waving of melaleuca blossom. The emotional release, the jubilation brings tears to the eyes of many, both indigenous and non-indigenous. It is a joyous occasion, a privilege to be there, and, as the first native title claim to be upheld in Southern Queensland, a great achievement. At 11.30am on Monday 4 July, 2011, the Quandamooka people gain rights over most of the island. Only a small fraction is exclusively theirs. Elsewhere their rights are non-exclusive and will not affect access by non-title holders. But what is significant, and what they are celebrating, is that they have finally been acknowledged as the traditional owners. They have the right to maintain an ongoing relationship with their lands.

And celebrate they do. Clap sticks maintain rhythm as dancers stamp, turn, jump. White ochre luminous on dark skin; knotted ropes swaying from the hips; girls in red sashes, black shirts, yellow skirts and headbands; red painted spears and shields marked with white spots and stripes. Aboriginal colours under a white marquee mark a commitment as binding as that we observed on the beach. They entertain us with the kangaroo dance as their ancestors did for Flinders.

There is a difference however. Today many of the dancers are of mixed race. Over the years some Quandamooka people have gone to live elsewhere; some have married into different cultures. They may be able to trace their descent from those early dancers on the beach, but their ancestors are not exclusively indigenous. Like Oodgeroo Noonuccal, whose lineage included a Filipino great-grandfather, and a Scottish grandfather, many of those celebrating have diverse origins. Their ties to this place are not solely a matter of birth. There is also an element of choice. Other ties could have claimed them, but this is where they want to belong. Megan Cope, a young artist descended from Quandamooka people, makes this clear. "I grew up on the mainland," she explains, "but I was always taught that the island was my land, my country where I belonged. So now I have come to work here and am getting to know it."

Behind the dancers the dais is draped in black, its borders marked by banksias, grasstree spears and white bottlebrush. A red tablecloth covers the table on which Anna Bligh and Ian Delaney, the applicant, sign the documents for the State, and then replicate the 'sands through the hands' ceremony made famous by Gough Whitlam in 1975, as a symbol of returning the land to its traditional owners. A song, 'From Little Things Big Things Grow' was written to commemorate this earlier occasion. It is not sung during the Quandamooka celebrations, but its sentiments seem apt. This historic determination marks the culmination of a long struggle, but it is a beginning as well as an end - an opportunity for growth, flowering and fruits.

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What the future holds for the Quandamooka people only time will tell. It is a point Auntie Margaret Iselin, President of the Minjerribah Elders – a group which has worked hard to gain

this title – makes clear when I revisit the island a few weeks later to speak to her about her life, the determination and what it means. Minjerribah, meaning 'island in the sun', seems far more suitable than Stradbroke, the title of an English earl.

The room is almost entirely filled with a large table, covered with paperwork. Doors open onto a verandah, but an electric fire on full makes it suffocatingly hot. Just in front of it sits 'Auntie Marg', directing proceedings. She is in her eighties, but still heavily involved in the community, teaching indigenous culture and island history. There is a walking stick at her side. She moves with some difficulty, but her hair is still dark and her eyes bright. Neatly dressed in a maroon suit with a striped shirt, she looks every inch a professional.

"It was beautiful," she says, "to hear my name read out in that hall. And to know that the work of the old people, the true people, hadn't been for nothing. It is a step forward for our people."

But it wasn't all celebration.

"We lost four elders in the weeks coming up to July 4th. We kept going to funerals. We knew they would have been happy to see our people's rights recognised, but there was sadness too. They weren't there to see it."

Respect for the elders is evident in everything she says. She describes her childhood on the mission as "very frugal", but she learnt about country.

"At weekends we went walking the bush tracks with the old grannies. They pointed out shrubs and berries and told us what they were used for. Bush tucker and medicines. They were very old, but they knew a lot."

And so does Auntie Marg. She shows me two books she has written about the plants on the island. The colour plates are beautiful - glossy, clear; the information detailed, comprehensive.

"We could do traditional things on the mission," she continues. "Language was stopped though."

So her next project is a dictionary of Aboriginal words for the island's children that she hopes will be in the school by October this year. But when I ask her what she thinks the determination will mean for future generations there is a note of caution.

"It will be what they make of it," she says. "I hope it will encourage them to educate others about our island culture, but a lot of the young ones, they don't know much. I hope they'll come and ask us, but we're getting old and there aren't many of us left."

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In 2007, when driving around North Queensland with my husband, we met one of the owners of Cooper Creek Wilderness in the Daintree. She told us a story: how one tree in a long-established orchard on her property appeared to have sacrificed itself for the others. She believed that, when attacked by insects, it had sent signals to the other trees, enabling them to produce chemicals to attract other insects that preyed on the unwanted bugs, while allowing itself to become infested. At the time, I was highly sceptical. However, that same year, an article in the National Geographic presented research showing that plants do recognise and communicate with relatives, and can indeed send out signals to their siblings. Plants, too, benefit from a sense of community and belonging.

Born in England, I spent five years of my childhood in South Africa, returned to England for eleven years and then migrated to Australia with my husband and two small daughters. For much of my life, my sense of belonging has been ambiguous, multi-focal, and constantly evolving. I have envied those who, like the Quandamooka people, know exactly where they belong. As I joined in their celebrations, I knew that I lacked those deep roots. My joy, like that of Auntie Marg, was tinged with sadness.

For over thirty-six years now I have flown back and forth across the hemispheres: for weddings, christenings, funerals, and holidays. There have been visits to Australia from family members, but no-one else has come to join us in the Antipodes. It has often been lonely. I have felt vulnerable; longed for support and when you put the telephone down, the distance just seems greater.

We arrived in Brisbane in early 1975. Like ET, I just wanted to phone home. The tarmac steamed. Wrestling a squirming baby and a fractious toddler determined to extricate her hand from my grasp, I struggled to the terminal, desperate to escape the searing inquisition of the January sun. Terminal did I say? It was just an old tin hangar.

Belatedly, the enormity of what I had done struck me. My response to the customs officer was curt. Yes, I did have some powdered milk. Surprising that. I had some nappies too if he was interested. You could see him thinking 'bloody whingeing poms' but he let me queue jump and found me somewhere to sit whilst my husband went through immigration. The latter emerged enthused. So exciting. A new beginning. More money. Better lifestyle. New faces. New places. Numb with exhaustion, I was mute.

Met by a decidedly eccentric gentleman whom I was assured was an old friend of my in-laws, and an eminent Brisbane surgeon, we bundled ourselves into a vehicle – no such things as child restraints then – and headed off. Despite the open windows I stuck to the seat, and the baby stuck to me. I remember noticing grass growing along the edge of the road where the kerbing should have been and how it thrust itself impudently through fissures in the tarmac.

Arriving at a house very different from anything I had seen before, I was desperate for a shower. That, however, meant sharing the facilities with a large huntsman spider and

her distended egg sac, which looked ready to discharge its cargo. I kept my glasses on as I splashed cold water, watching its every move. Our host thoughtfully informed me that he didn't kill them because they kept down the cockroaches. Needless to say, when he offered me a stiff gin and tonic, I accepted.

After that I cannot tell you what happened. How I got to bed, or how the children were bathed, fed or put to sleep. But many hours later, woken by a demented cackling, I sat bolt upright and yelled, "What the bloody hell is that?"

It was the beginning of a long journey.

Twice in the last thirty-six years I have been woken to be told of unexpected deaths on the other side of the world. Firstly my father. Then one of my brothers. On both occasions I went back for several weeks. Both times agonies of guilt and self doubt beset me. How could I leave my mother alone? She was only in her early sixties and had always been dependent on my father. I was the only daughter. At that time I seriously doubted the wisdom of emigration and tried to persuade my family here that we should return. But as my own children pointed out: England wasn't where they belonged. This scenario was replayed fourteen years later when my brother was killed in a climbing accident, leaving three young sons, the youngest only four.

These tragic events, however, actually had benefits that were not evident at the time. Paradoxically, despite the distance, I developed a much closer relationship with my mother. She found the courage to fly to Australia every two or three years, and since she stayed for several weeks at a time, got to know us all very well. Sometimes better than any of us liked. After my brother's death I returned to England alternate years, and formed a strong relationship with my sister-in-law, who is now like a sister to me. Perhaps when there are obstacles, people make more effort to preserve relationships that really matter to them. Does displacement actually lead us to value what we have lost? Is that why the Quandamooka people have maintained their sense of community?

Some plants, suggests the National Geographic, have a human streak of individuality. They grow more vigorously, developing stronger root systems when planted alongside strangers rather than with close relatives. The cooperative approach gives way to competition. Quite where this leaves my *Cordyline Fruticosa* is unclear. It has neither family support to protect it from predators, nor competition to stimulate growth. Its forebears came from overseas, and most have found themselves suitable spots, which may not be their 'country' exactly, but where they can, at least, be comfortable. This one, however, exists in solitary squalor. Maybe it just can't make up its mind where it belongs.

So if displacement can stimulate growth, is it possible that never questioning your sense of belonging might actually impede personal development? There is no doubt that the journey has pushed me in ways I would never have expected. I am no longer too worried about huge

spiders, and can despatch cockroaches with enthusiasm. I had a third child – something I would not have contemplated had we stayed in the UK – whose words of wisdom acted as a catalyst for this essay. Finding it difficult to pursue my career in nursing without family backup, I changed tack and went to university. It was an enriching experience that challenged many unexamined assumptions – especially those pertaining to Britain and its role in the world. We have visited many fascinating places on our trips to and from England. On balance, I have more in common with the plants that grow stronger when thrown among strangers. At times my leaves may appear pallid and limp, their attempts to reach for the sun unconvincing, but beneath the ground, hidden from those who do not trouble to look closely, I seek nourishment, establishing connections which will help me grow.

In the first three months of this year, 2011, I am in England, watching my mother die. During my years in Australia I have always hankered after a northern spring. This year I get my wish. They say you should always be careful what you wish for. Arriving in the bitterness of early February, the branches are bare. Dark skeletons stark against a sombre sky. But a few days later, the first snowdrops put in a timid appearance. As my mother fades, the crocuses open oval lips in a chorus of regal purple and gold. Then the daffodil buds, reverent in prayer, lift their trumpets to greet the sun. I like to think they are celebrating Mum's entry to the life hereafter which she firmly believes. But for me, they are not just a symbol of hope and new life. They are a welcome reminder of the wattle that sheds its soft drifts of gold over my back deck in Brisbane.

Close to the end I sit in the quiet space of Tewkesbury Abbey. It is a magnificent building. Overhead the gothic vaulting soars heavenwards, and the Yorkist suns shine down on the choir. I have enjoyed some wonderful music there. But today I feel the centuries sit on my shoulders like a physical weight pushing me into the cold stone paving. The damp of the water meadows seem to rise through my feet and permeate my body. Iron railings guard a hole where lie the remains of George, Duke of Clarence – reputedly drowned in a butt of Malmsey – and his wife Isabel, daughter of Warwick the Kingmaker, provide a stark reminder of the end which awaits us all. But as I turn away from this crypt, to the south a pair of modern stained glass windows, backlit by a sudden sun, warm me. Gold, blue, turquoise, green, white; the colours of Moreton Bay, Quandamooka, home.

Whilst my mother lived, a part of me belonged with her. Finally, with her death, I am able to say, quite unambiguously, that Australia is my home. Specifically in Queensland. But it has taken thirty-six years. Not for me the certainty of the Quandamooka people, most of whom know where they belong, even if it has taken nearly two centuries to get it acknowledged. Australia is not my native land. Once, it was a case of survival where I lacked many essential nutrients; my parents, siblings, friends, the distinct seasonal changes of the landscape. But that lack led to unexpected accomplishments and growth.

So what of my stoic plant? It must have grown strong roots in its isolated, uncongenial environment or it wouldn't have lasted this long. And it has put on a bit of a spurt since

Queensland's unusually wet summer. The Poinciana trees must have been a little more generous than usual. I must get out the garden tools and move it. Find it a spot in the garden where it will get the sunlight, the moisture, the nutrients it needs and some company. Unlike me, it didn't get to choose where it grew. I imagine it just found itself in the building rubble. Being a hardy individualist, it made the best of a bad job. My son was right. It deserved to survive. It is time it was given a chance to develop the magnificent colours for which the *Cordyline Fruticosa* is renowned. Even if it's not a native, surely it can flourish, producing flowers, berries, and new suckers in a country that has become its own?