

As Areias do Inferno

Early Portuguese sailors called it “*As Areias do Inferno*” (The Sands of Hell); Khoisan Bushmen know it as “*The Land God Made in Anger*”. To me it is the Namibian Skeleton Coast, a place of aura, mystery and impenetrability that is constantly scoured by gritty, caterwauling winds.

I had always wanted to travel there, to discover the resting place of my grandfather, Matthias Koraseb, who tragically perished during an unsuccessful attempt to rescue crew and passengers from the freighter, Dunedin Star, which foundered off the coast in 1942.

For two days I journeyed north from Swakopmund with my Khoisan guide, Kuse. Initially we drove parallel to the churning, spitting mass of sea. An area once feared and shunned is now prized as a place of tranquillity and impossible beauty. Stark, savage and sterile. Laced with monstrous cross currents and tempestuous coastlines, the perfidious ice-cold Southern Atlantic Ocean stretches, wreathed in ethereal sea fog, bordered by towering graceful dunes. The wind shrieked with laughter. The waves jostled with the fear of losing.

Cutting inland through the forbidding sand, this place seemed completely devoid of life. Constant breezes sent a coarse layer of dust dancing across the golden void which stretched endlessly ahead of us. Burnished, voluptuous, dunes, sculpted by desert winds into imposing sinuous curves, meringue whips and scimitar-like edges, marched determinedly towards the aggressive sea ever shifting, ever changing. The inhospitable landscape was bathed in varying hues of colour: warm tints of burnt-sienna, apricot and ochre. By day it was a burning, merciless desert of glare and death shrouded in an eerie crypt-like silence. At night it was as cold as the Irish Banshee’s unrestful soul.

Back on the shoreline we carefully picked our way through the bones of stranded leviathans bleached phantom-white by the intense heat of the sun which hung in the sky like Titan’s fiery wheel. Other skeletons littered the coast, including the sand and wind-blasted remains of tugs, liners and purse seiners together with an abundance of their flotsam and jetsam which lay strewn for endless miles of desolate beach. Death was everywhere; everywhere.

Kuse and I walked the last stretch of the journey to the wreck. What remained: decaying boilers draped in a cloak of acid green and chocolate brown bladderwrack, scores of splintered pinewood boxes and the remains of a primitive hut where the survivors had gathered awaiting rescue. I had discovered the final resting place of my grandfather; his crudely fashioned grave marked by a cairn and a driftwood cross. I felt a wild grief building up inside me until I could no longer block the erupting sadness. Tears flowed.

Kuse’s profound words, an ancient Khoisan saying, continue to ring in my ears:

“The day we die, a soft breeze will wipe out our footprints in the sand. When the wind dies down, who will tell the timelessness that once we walked this way in the dawn of time?”

The stone I placed on Mathias’ grave will be my answer to that question.

First Prize

Aalish Watts – Arbory Primary School