

THE QUARRY

The Space Invader and the Mud Lotus

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SURVIVAL OF THE FITTEST

When did my midlife crisis begin? Before the tears on the tiny plane, or the farewell party? Wait, no—let’s go back a bit—maybe the painful arrows and the street battle. Okay ‘battle’ is a *slight* overstatement. It might have been the moment my husband brought me in a breakfast tray.

He must have wanted my ‘company’. There was even a red rose in a champagne flute, which did make the breakfast look very pretty. Too bad his timing was off. I was mid-paragraph into the fresh ideas of my hero, Pacific scholar Prof Epeli Hau’ofa.¹ It was not time for sex, oh *no, no, nooo*. It was time to get angry, get organised, and save sinking Polynesia from climate change or being nuked by Kim Jong-un. The coffee was good though, he got that right. When he flopped into bed beside me I dipped the croissant into jam, turned a page, and kept reading.

He sighed, presumably about my lack of attention, and picked up a random book from the bedside table.

‘Are you going to keep wiggling that foot?’ It was vibrating back and forth as he read, making the bed wobble.

The foot stopped.

‘I might go play guitar,’ he said, strutting off. He wasn’t getting any action in here. The house was still; the kids were no doubt lazing in their beds, hooked up to YouTube. I heard the crackle and buzz of the amp being switched on, down the hall. But it wasn’t that which threatened my serene ladyspace, it was the anthropologist, author, artist, agitator, *legend*, Hau’ofa, that had got me all riled up.

A walk would do me good. I squeezed into my spandex tights, laced the Adidas, and cranked some electronica into my earpods to fuel my turn around the harbour.

Wind disturbed the mangroves and a black cormorant dove under the ruffled water surface. It reappeared with a tiny silver fish slung from its beak.

I mused and fumed over Epeli’s words as I strolled along. About how the Pacific Ocean, lapping almost everywhere on the planet—even right here at my feet in Sydney—was peppered with awesome Polynesian explorers for millennia before those pesky nineteenth-century colonisers arrived, divided, and dominated the vast Polynesian network—some, my motley ancestors. They carved it up with their invisible imperial boundaries into ‘tiny, needy bits,’ to be *developed*.ⁱⁱ They didn’t appreciate the wholeness of the Pacific Ocean; it was to them, the middle of bloody nowhere.

‘Hole in the doughnut,’ is how they saw us, warned Epeli; ‘If we do not exist for others, then we could in fact be dispensable.’ⁱⁱⁱ It was as though the sea connection was worthless.

A man was jogging along toward me. Instead of staying on his side of the track, he made a sudden 180-degree turn. He jogged across my path, over my feet, as if I were invisible. He didn’t adjust his route for me one iota. A surge of outrage compelled me to curl my foot into a sneaky hook and discreetly ankle tap him as he barged through my personal space. He was quick enough to work out what was happening—adjusting his stride so he didn’t fall.

I maintained original course and bearing.

He jogged backwards, glaring at me like I blew out his birthday candles.

‘You tried to trip me!’

I death-stared him through my sunnies.

‘Watch your step,’ I said.

Jogging Man looked ready to pop a vessel.

‘You’re a bitch.’

Very slowly, I raised my two middle fingers, 1 *and* 2. There. You. Go. I cranked it a notch higher.

He looked me up and down with an overdone head pivot, as if his eyes couldn’t do the task themselves.

‘I hope...I hope your children get run over by a bus!’

He was seeking some part of my identity to trash. *Mother*, he figured.

‘Why don’t you hurry up and fuck off,’ I said.

I’m not scared of you, I thought, although I was shaking. I considered the likelihood of him thumping me—no one was around—and he was bulky. His blue eyes burned, incandescent with rage. No doubt, we both had adrenaline careening through our systems.

He stayed up in my face, trying to intimidate me, but I did not slow my step, smile, nor apologise. *Do not fuck with a Maori lady when she is mad.*

Then, it was as if the wind suddenly abandoned his sail; he knew words would not hurt me. He performed a theatrical manscowl and ran off, huffing.

I threw the parting punch:

‘Next time watch where you’re going, cockhead.’

MUTATION

Later that night, back at home; all nice and calm again, I felt very bad for Jogging Man (*idiot*). Of course I was proud of standing my ground, but my good shoulder-angel was more harpy than usual, making me ashamed of the way I’d done it; reaching for that familiar weapon—anger—so powerful yet so terrible. I blamed it on *insightful* literature, poured myself another red wine and tried to forget about it.

So I wasn’t shocked when Facebook analytics, which knows us better than our own mothers do, magically delivered this video to my feed; because it had digested and diagnosed

every procrastinatory rant, preach, like, and share I'd tapped out since 2005. It submitted its sum total knowledge of me that night:

'Transform Your Anger' with Thich Nhat Hanh.^{iv}

I hit [Play].

The Vietnamese Zen master is sitting in brown robes, beside a girl wearing a pink dress. She looks about ten. He's holding up his fist to his own face and has a mean look.

'You want to give that boy or girl a punch.'

Sprung bad, I thought.

He smiles as he jabs the air around his head. She smiles back.

'Punish him or her. That is the anger in us... that anger is a kind of mud, it will smear everything.'

He's got a strong, Vietnamese accent, so I'm grateful for the subtitles.

'We need to be aware that the mud of anger, we must handle.'

He brings both hands together as if gripping a hefty mud marble.

'But without the mud, you cannot grow lotus flowers.'

[Insert time-lapse video of an incredible pink lotus flower opening]

'So the mud is useful somehow.'

The video cuts back to the monk and the girl surrounded by a luscious array of tropical flowers and candles. Cue bamboo-flute music.

'So your anger is useful somehow, maybe you should not... let it out.'

He gently cocks his head at her. *Maybe she laid into her little shit of a brother?*

'You should not throw it away. If you know how to make good use of your anger, you can grow the Lotus of Peace, of Joy, of Forgiveness. And if we look deeply, we'll be able to understand. And when we understand, there is love. And when there is love, anger must...'

His palms open like lotus petals.

'Transform itself.'

The girl gives a simple nod. She gets it.

I, on the other hand, was trying very hard to work out how he got from mud to love.

Google: Booktopia: ‘Thich Nhat Hahn Mud Lotus’. I pulled out my credit card and ordered his book. It was obvious I needed to stop spraying mud everywhere.

DIVERSITY

My street-stoush with Jogging Man was a tremor that heralded a quake. He was like a small dog that had got hold of my trouser leg. I wanted to kick the fucker off to fix the problem. But seriously, what *was* my problem? Was it really because he was a Pale-faced Manspreader invading my Ladyspace?

The next level of my mud quest came at me via another scholar. My two majors were, like the Pacific and the Atlantic, meeting at last. The anthropology of art was meandering into creative writing territory. We read Michael Jackson’s (*yep, cool name*) ethnographic-poetry, which veered away from desiccated academia. I was immediately fanboyant—more so when I discovered he came from my grandparent’s sleepy seaside town (Nelson, New Zealand), which I reckoned his poem, *Making it Otherwise*^v was about:

‘... silt spread on the estuary
like a map of darkness
to be read by those
journeying toward clarity of speech.’

A small prophecy that held no meaning, *yet*—but I digress.

I was intrigued by his sweet-tempered explanation of the human condition. Apparently we are plural creatures, constantly trying to balance the seesaw between ‘our sense of what we owe others and what we owe ourselves.’ We want to be our own bosses and have all the things, *AND* we want to share nicely with our group, for the common good. Everyone struggles with this in a myriad of individual ways.^{vi}

We tend to employ a bunch of simplified categories to frame our battles (for resources and ideologies). You can imagine all the variations on us/them: *Raging Feminist Maori Mother Abuses Misogynist Second-Australian Fitness Addict*.

Jackson agrees identity labels are helpful in getting us what we want—we should definitely study how we adopt them for good effect—marginalised people can be especially ravenous for identity.^{vii}

Jackson says good anthropology (and writing, I presumed) will shine light onto the nitty-gritty ways we struggle with these tensions, mixed feelings, and contradictions. Nuanced description can unmask, and is more meaningful than, simplistic either/ors—*when we write the life we actually live*.^{viii}

This was the kicker for me: ‘Any one person embodies the potential to be any other.’^{ix}

Wait. What? Sounded like Jackson was saying someone can simultaneously carry the worldview of an adult and (a very needy inner) child; or exhibit the prejudices of the asshole and the victim. I am actually Maori and Irish. *Goddamit*, it’s possible Jogging Man was a nice guy who wasn’t wearing his glasses, just being a dick that day.

Epeli Hau’ofa soothed me, too—with his messier, *oceanic* view of our modern regional identity. Our diverse group—including new arrivals—were clever buggers, aye, once again regularly visiting each other, via Virgin Air; taking more than bags of cava or packets of pineapple lumps across borders. We were exchanging jobs, spreading welfare dollars, swapping sporting cups, and lovers. Epeli claimed our survival could depend upon us acting in concert to protect the Pacific Ocean (and by extension, Earth) from usurping ratbags who don’t respect it, who don’t see the real value of our epic space.^x His warm voice wants to reunite criss-crossing Oceanians... *who are all who love her*, by being more expansive and tolerant, so we can transform ourselves: from being belittled ‘islands in the sea’, back into ‘a sea of islands’.^{xi}

Heh. I started to like myself again. A roundhouse-kickass style had helped Oceanian women survive their dunking into the realm of *nowhere*. But, perhaps I could venture beyond the margins of stereotypes or monoculture; maybe morph into a more genuine creature, rather than some abstract, divided identity thrust forth in order for there to be only one winner.

GENETIC DRIFT

Finally, the new book arrived, *No Mud, No Lotus: The Art of Transforming Suffering*.^{xii}

It was really excellent timing because my spunky little grandmother had just died, unexpectedly.

Breathe, incanted the ninety-one-year-old Zen master.

Thích Nhất Hạnh knows his readers' mud is not limited to swearing at joggers. He did not promise to deliver anyone from suffering, but would teach me how to suffer, properly. *The first arrow of pain*, he soothingly explained, is pain you initially feel: anger, rejection, failure, injury, separation. The death of someone you love.^{xiii}

Mum asked me to speak at Nana's farewell: 'I am somewhere I have never been before: Nelson without you.' There was a lot more in that speech; but for some reason losing Nana also meant losing the whole town and occupants.

After seven happy-sad days spent setting up and conducting Nana's funeral street party (Photoshopped invites; TV slideshow; where to park the Portaloos? red or black serviettes?); as well as catching up with hordes of cousins and uncles (beer and burgers; cycling along the river; reminiscing Nana over G&T's; weeping while weeding her chic garden), it was time to return home to my little family in Sydney.

But grief opens up a hole; it irritates any festering, untended wound, makes it weep. The death of a matriarch can get the pus up.

The wound, what was it?

Breathing in, I know suffering is there.

Breathing out, I say hello to my suffering.^{xiv}

Nhất Hạnh dropped a magnificent truth bomb: *the second arrow of pain*. Usually self-inflicted, it may take the form of judgement: the crap we tell ourselves to make our suffering much worse.^{xv}

I belong nowhere, throbbed the arrow in the wound.

I pined like a lonely dog, seeing Nelson disappear through the airplane porthole, the din of the twin propellers masked my whimpering. As it banked over glacial blue water whorling into the estuaries below, I started crying up in that lonely airspace and could not stop for four days. I leave my extended family, again, *and again and again*.

Nhất Hạnh writes: ‘Some of our ill-being comes from hurt and pain in our own life; but some has been transmitted to us by our ancestors... you are the continuation of your parents... your body and mind contain their suffering and their hopes as well as your own.’^{xvi}

I’d moved away from serious Buddhism a few years back when it got a bit mystical in the reincarnation department, but this guy was making things clearer. Nhất Hạnh explained how my body transported the genes and stories and happenings of all the people who came before, who had made me. I carried in my cells all their luck and habits. I was just the next step in all our journeys.

Jackson’s poem, *Pioneers*^{xvii}, seemed to acknowledge their presence:

‘I am theirs and of them and for them speak.
My hands have gone over the roofs and gullies
of their names.
These hills I love under are their doing.
I have been given what they got.
I am what they became.’

I was seven when my parents vamoosed New Zealand to explore the world. Economic migration—ah, exciting new opportunities!—meant three nations, six primary schools, and ten houses changed before I slumped into high school. Boring, lovely old Nelson remained my spiritual basecamp, *where I clambered a concrete blue whale to see the beach*. I posted Nana and Pop regular airmail about our adventures; they were my first readers, and always wrote back. Letters were all that anchored me to their silver-haired kindnesses.

I had lost my huge family and beautiful land, *and I never had a choice*.

Why must I keep denying the wound? I squinted through my murky grief and saw broken arrow heads deeply embedded beneath my lifted chest armour.

Mindfully breathe, lulled Nhất Hạnh, it will create space to recognise suffering energy, then embrace it, ‘like a mother taking care of a crying baby... in her arms, without judging or

ignoring it... with the energy of tenderness.’^{xviii} I hugged my wailing mud baby, just by breathing.

Stacked on Nana’s coffee table had been family albums stuffed with hundreds of photos. One in particular—transported from 1973—gave me pause. Dad was standing on the dock, before his soon-to-depart frigate, hugging two-year-old me; I’m wearing his sailor cap and looking très grumpy. I didn’t know then, what I know now; that he was serving aboard the HMAS *Otago*, a Royal New Zealand Navy ship sent to protest the French nuclear testing at Mururoa Atol. Their military attention helped send those nuclear tests underground.

Our family line of warriors, sailors, explorers, and migrants seeking harbour stretched back through time. My uncle had shown me illustrations of the nineteenth-century tall ships that carried my great-grandmother from Ireland to New Zealand, a late arrival after the ocean-going migration *waka* had brought our *iwi* here, the *Te Arawa* and *Ngāi Tahu* Maori. I carried inside me more cheeky-sad travellers than one person could own.

How do I connect us? How do I belong?

Remove the second arrow.

Jackson, who knows something of being a bridge between art and social science, says, ‘When we don’t have power to materially change something, one power we can use is via *the work of imagination*, to rethink and reconstruct our reality, “undo deeds of the past,” with forgiveness’.^{xix}

Could I revere my conflicting moods, be a breathing paradox? *Notice*, I imagined Jackson whispering to me, *notice it all*: the ancestors within me / the daughter left on the wharf / the girl torn from Aotearoa / the Oceanian who surveyed the world / the Sydney woman who battles space invaders. I am not either/ors—these are parts of a whole, spacious, *Sea of Me*, and she has many expressions.

All this sounds a bit like the ethereal lotus.

Jackpot. Mud into love.

Works Cited

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- ^{vi} Jackson, Michael. 2011. 'Not to Find One's Way in a City,' *Life Within Limits: Well-being in a World of Want*. Duke University Press, Durham and London, pp.359-383. (p.375)
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- ^{viii} Jackson, Michael. 2012. 'On the Work and Writing of Ethnography.' *Between One and One Another*. University of California Press, Berkeley, pp.167-214. (p.172)
- ^{ix} Jackson, *Minima Ethnographica* (p. 208)
- ^x Hau'ofa (p. 42)
- ^{xi} Hau'ofa's essays: 'Our Sea of Islands,' and 'The Ocean in Us,' in *We Are the Ocean*, express all these ideas, throughout.
- ^{xii} Nhat Hanh, Thich. 2014. *No Mud, No Lotus: The Art of Transforming Suffering*, Parallax Press, Berkley, California.
- ^{xiii} *No Mud, No Lotus* (p.46)
- ^{xiv} *No Mud, No Lotus* (p. 23)
- ^{xv} *No Mud, No Lotus* (p.47-48)
- ^{xvi} *No Mud, No Lotus* (p.33)
- ^{xvii} Jackson, *Duty Free* (p.28)
- ^{xviii} *No Mud, No Lotus* (p. 27)
- ^{xix} Jackson, *Minima Ethnographica* (p. 203)