

THE QUARRY

Mischa Parkee

The Course of Empire

Part One: The Savage State



Thomas Cole, *The Savage State*. Oil on canvas, 1834

This is the savage state. You are the savage that charges down into the wilderness; a hunter with only eyes for your prey. This is your basic human instinct, yet you are susceptible to the expectations of consummating an empire. The light of dawn is struggling to break through the clouds and maintain brightness in the severity of the anticipated storm; your rawness of emotion, your untainted early stages of desire, your ultimately savage state. But the sun is soon to be unsuccessful; the figurative native is soon to be dispossessed from the land he calls home.

*

It is raining the day she goes to see Thomas Cole's *The Course of Empire*. The humid wetness soaks through the layers of her dress and her skin, and her bones shudder in exhilaration. The paintings from Cole's collection are on loan for only a matter of weeks before they are to head back to the New York Gallery of Fine Arts. Mercy had driven the two and a half hours from Sydney to Cessnock to spend the day absorbed in the rich and rustic textures of the converted town hall, now known as The Hunter Gallery. Cole's is the biggest collection that the esteemed rural gallery has ever commissioned and she is excited about finally getting to see one of her favourite artists' works in the flesh. She had studied his brush strokes, his technique, and his harboured ambition to illustrate a pessimistic vision - the rise and fall of civilisation - for her thesis at the National Art School. But now, looking at the dark palette of *The Savage State*, she sees it, not for its commentary on man's early relationship to nature, but for what it really is. She sees the chaos that had been her relationship with Lucas; the cavernous wilderness in the foreground is like a giant gaping hole waiting to swallow the charging native, whose only thoughts are on securing their prey. She sees the vast openness of the land and danger of the looming storm clouds, and how easy it had been to be swallowed by her ideals.

There had been something about him that had made her ravenous. The movement of the days became more like that of poetry. The sun would lull into the moon, the days unknowingly become nights. All her thoughts were consumed by the burning beneath her skin, that instinctive impulse to secure her prey. It was as if her concept of time had become nothing but an inconspicuous blur as her hunger took over her senses and ravaged her thoughts. As it kept

slipping into new day after new day, time seemed to escape her conscious thoughts until she was nothing but the shell of her former self; nothing but a fleshy animal of desire and hibernation. She had been part of the real world when she was first with him, but part of a fantasy with her own set of unattainable expectations, oblivious to the poison of her prey.

Mercy had always tried to make contact; when they went to the little Tapas restaurant on their first date, or when they walked down to the pub to get a quick bite before they went to see the latest superhero film that Lucas liked. Every so often she attempted to subtly let her hand catch the back of his as they walked in a strategic dance, like a hunter stalking its prey. Although Lucas seemed not to notice, she was sure that he had just been playing hard-to-get. Looking back, however, she thinks herself foolish for not seeing it earlier, for wanting to capture the feeling of it all with oils on a piece of canvas when every moment a little piece of thread had been unravelling from a jumper; the storm of the Savage State had been closing in on the sun.

Part Two: The Arcadian State



Thomas Cole, *The Arcadian or Pastoral State*. Oil on canvas, 1834

This is Arcadia. It represents the space inside your mind that believes in miracles and impossibilities. The storm has cleared to reveal the idyllic alternative to the savage state. The part of you that is unpredictable; aligned with the hunter's mindset of securing your prey. Much of the wilderness's uncertainties have given way to ploughed fields and pruned bushes, depicting the foundations of what will eventually be your empire. It is the fabled world of knights in shining armour, of princesses who always find their 'happily ever afters.' It is the greeting-card picture world of your brain; the world that never came into being, and that never can.

*

Lucas hadn't felt the rain. He wore only one layer of clothing, and Mercy noticed that he had no goose-flesh and did not shudder. Mercy, who sat in the passenger seat of his Toyota as they made their way back to Annandale after seeing one of Lucas's unmemorable superhero films, remembers feeling the cold wetness of the rain seeping into her pores as if she had been sprayed by a garden hose. Her eyes continually glanced sideways, searching for Lucas's eyes, for a reaction from him; an acknowledgement of her coldness, for him to

take her hand or turn the heating on. His eyes met hers once, briefly, and then continued watching the road ahead.

She was wearing the crimson blouse she knew Lucas liked best. He had told her on one of their first dates that it had gone well with her long ebony hair. Mercy had been in a particularly jovial mood despite the weather. She was imagining all the ways in which it might prompt him to encourage her into his bedroom. He would take off her wet clothes and warm her body against his own. It would be a feeding ground. Her, pulling his see-through white shirt over his head, and him, tugging at each little red pearly button of her blouse with the fumbling hands of desire. They would kiss each other greedily, devouring one another until there was nothing left but scraps - leftovers for a morning feast.

‘I’ve never felt this close to anyone before,’ he had whispered, jolting her awake from her fantasies.

Mercy knew from bits and pieces he had told her that he wasn't close to his parents - though she hadn't quite deduced why at that point - and that this had fractured him somehow, like there was a magnetic field inside of him that would always find a way to repel.

Her heart swelled. ‘Neither have I,’ she replied.

But of course, that wasn't exactly true. She had felt a similar way at least once, or possibly twice before. There was Darren in Year 11. He had wooed her with his surface level love of Romantic poetry, which had an unwavering ability to satisfy her youthfully primitive desires when they should have been studying for biology exams. And then there was Noah during her first years at art school. Mercy had fallen for his bad-boy-misunderstood persona, although she quickly tired of him when his façade wore thin, and she discovered that really he prided himself on taking inspiration from Picasso simply so he could paint whatever the hell he wanted and claim it was ‘abstract.’ But she didn't want to ruin the moment with Lucas. She didn't want their relationship to fall. She had wanted the idyllic pastures of their early and neatly defined relationship to remain perfectly ploughed, ready for the next stage, which meant responding in ways she knew he wanted. She was the hunter, and he was merely her prey.

Mercy wonders now, however, whether or not Lucas had been playing hunter as well.

Part Three: The Consummation of Empire



Thomas Cole, *The Consummation of Empire*. Oil on canvas, 1836

Within the Empire, the majestic sturdy columns have slowly been constructed to form the foundations of your idealised relationship. Each brick, each stone, each pillar represents a struggle you believe you have conquered together, that you have built over time to finally form the beloved city of your dreams. The knights and princesses of your Arcadian state often visit this idle place to feast with their old friends and laze beneath the sail of a lulling boat, drifting without direction. It is a monument of achievement and pride, a soundly built structure of your desires. But an Empire built of ideals is doomed to fall. You cannot live in the Empire, feasting and idling for long. Soon you will have to face reality, and in reality your beloved Empire has been consummated to fail.

*

Mercy was preparing the fruit platter. The setting sunlight twinkled softly through the window of their kitchen. The thought of finally having a space of their own, one that they had built themselves to create their very own personal empire had overwhelmed her with pride. She was starting to truly believe that their relationship was reaching sustainability, that they were compatible, that

they understood one another beyond the initial hunger. By the time she had placed each watermelon slice, each strawberry quarter, each little plump blueberry into its prospected spot on the plate she had created quite a well-constructed tower.

‘Looks good,’ Lucas said, peering his head around the corner of the kitchen door.

She remembers feeling at ease in their new kitchen, preparing for their small housewarming as if she had done it a thousand times before, as if her and Lucas’s joint preparation was some sort of anticipated ritual. Looking back on it, however, Mercy thinks about how when she was doing the vacuuming, Lucas hadn’t even offered to lift up his feet.

When their guests arrived - an eclectic mix of Mercy’s old friends from Fort St High School, artsy classmates, and Lucas’s joinery buddies - she poured drinks and smiled like she was the face of a toothpaste ad. And later in the evening, when they had all had a bit to drink, talking over the top of one another about their lives and where they saw themselves in the future, Lucas reached across her to pour himself his sixth whisky of the night. Mercy forced herself to feel an indifferent sense of contentment as his arm brushed against hers, and she gave him what she thought was a playful glare of admonishment.

‘Just one more,’ Lucas declared.

‘Don’t you think you’ve had enough,’ she said, reaching out to place an affectionate hand on his sun-tanned arm.

Lucas drew away. ‘Oh don’t be ridiculous, Mercy! I can have one more drink.’ She was shocked into immobility at his hostility as he grabbed the whisky bottle in a fumbling display. The act might have been considered funny - a humorous anecdote to be passed on at the next dinner party; “remember that time Lucas got really drunk and made such a fool of himself? And remember how caring Mercy was, taking him off to bed like that? If that was my boyfriend, I would have left him in a heap on the floor.” That was if he hadn’t lost his footing and catapulted straight into her festooning fruit display with a loud and echoing clatter.

Mercy remembers watching the watermelon pieces drop with a deflated sounding squelch, the carefully quartered strawberries hit the floor, and the perfectly plump blueberries roll off in all directions (she had found little collections of them under the couch and beneath the shelves later). With the blinds tightly shut and the lamps casting a harsh glare across the mess, she noticed how the light was suddenly shining on things differently.

Part Four: Destruction



Thomas Cole, *Destruction*. Oil on canvas, 1836

Destruction is dawning. This is what has become of your meticulously constructed Empire. This is what happens when you refuse to let nature take its course, when you become too distracted by the ideal. This is what happens when two people come from incompatible magnetic poles; they repel. Nature is dissatisfied with the idealised, man-made structure. The Empire begins to crumble, to fall apart at the seams. The savage clouds that the sun fought so hard to overcome are thickening, planning their destruction. The knights and princesses of Arcadia attempt to flee, terrified of the city's crumbling walls, the rising water, and the fire's ravenous rage. But there is no escape. The native is coming to reclaim the land that rightfully belongs to him.

*

'Let's go see the factories,' Lucas announced one overcast weekend in July. 'I want you to see where I work.'

He was reaching out. He must have been. Desperation filled Mercy's lungs. He hadn't initiated an outing in a long time. She couldn't quite remember how long it had been, but she thought sometime around when she first moved

into Lucas's apartment about nine months prior. She didn't know how she should answer. The desperation to connect clouded her judgement.

She had been reading Tom Stoppard's *Arcadia* at the time. She remembers this because she found her copy a few days later, discarded amongst an array of trashy *Woodworker* and *GQ* magazines. Her heart had beat faster at the thought of Lucas pondering Chaos Theory and the analogy of stirring jam into pudding. On a lazy Sunday afternoon perhaps, when the sun hovers in that perfect transitional stage between day and night upon the horizon.

She never before considered the possibility that he had simply tossed the book there without even realising it was hers. Had he known it was one of her favourites? Surely she'd told him - although, staring blankly at the flames of the *Destruction*, she can't quite recall.

When they arrived at the factories, they had lain on the concrete of the deserted carpark and watched the smoke leak from the heavy industrial chimneys as casually as if they were watching stars. Mercy wanted to see what he saw in the smoke, his furniture-making and the industrial world it came from. But in her mind, she was lying in an uncomfortable position with the pressure of the oily concrete beneath her head, watching pollution fill the air, slowly taking away their oxygen.

Is that what he sees too? Mercy had thought. By the look on his sombre face, he must have seen something more. He seemed to possess a connection to the factories and their smoke that ran deeper than a workplace affinity.

Maybe he saw how soullessly mechanical they were, that all they were able to do was something they were programmed to achieve. It concerned Mercy that there was not an ounce of life in the factories and that the same emptiness she associated with them she also saw in Lucas's eyes. A vast, yet polluted nothingness, like the clouds of smoke that ooze from the chimneys, resembling giant cigarettes. The smoke had no purpose. It was simply what was left over from the mechanical workings of the factories where most of Lucas's time was consumed.

Maybe that's what he saw, Mercy thinks, a resemblance to himself.

Part Five: Desolation



Thomas Cole, *Desolation*. Oil on canvas, 1836

The desolation will arrive slowly. The remains of the Empire will decay, until there is nothing left of it but a cold hard emptiness. You brought on the desolation yourself. The chaos of a deteriorating ideal has taken its toll, and nature has finally taken back what belongs to it. Beneath the surface of the mysterious water lie the remnants of destroyed cities, the desolate state of relationships passed, of artificial empires. People may visit it, take pictures, commemorate what might have been. But in the end, it is completely void of life, nothing but a past to be consumed by the earth until there is nothing left of it except dirt. From the dirt, with time, the wilderness of the savage state will return, slowly replenishing itself until the cycle begins again and another idealised relationship builds its first brick in what will eventually become this once again: desolation.

*

Mercy stares at the landscape of the final painting. There are no people in it, she realises for the first time. Perhaps they all drowned in the expanse of water whilst she had still been forcing herself to remain on the surface, too afraid to be dragged down to the bottom where all of those dead souls lie. There is nothing

there but a sky of savage clouds, devoid of the mystical dawn light she so desperately wants to see in everything.

But, like jam cannot be unstirred from pudding, she knows that time cannot turn backwards. Mercy is there with them now, sinking beneath the surface to let nature swallow her. She embraces the desolation. She no longer feels like one wrong move could fracture her meticulously crafted world, no longer feels like the native of *The Savage State* is displaced from his homeland.

Mercy walks down The Hunter Gallery's stone steps with purpose, out into the greying light of the late afternoon. When she reaches the final step, she turns back around to glance at the converted town hall. Its sturdy sandpappy columns look like the entrance to a tomb, Thomas Cole's *The Course of Empire* locked tightly away inside. A moment passes before she turns and takes the last step to the bottom, making her way down the long, winding path back to where she parked her car.

The empire that she built up with Lucas had fallen, leaving her in the vast solitary space that stretches out beyond the horizon - further than her idealistic eye can see. And she is free to do anything she wants with it.