

Beginner's Mind

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First Day.

Before dawn, midwinter.

He thinks he sees a whale pass, a long dark shadow half a league out. Hundreds of gulls wheel noisily above him. The water is black, opaque, swirling like dark molten metal. The tide was full when he launched an hour ago, and since then he has paddled nearly three kilometres out to sea.

At the north-eastern end of the island a jumble of black blocks like burnt tree stumps falls into the sea. The horizon tilts to 45 degrees as a big swell surges up the underwater shelf, bulges out, not quite breaking, then sucks back down. A dark prow of rock backlit by the now rising sun marks the end of what feels safe. Now, the whole ocean reaches out past the horizon, unimpeded until Santiago thousands of kilometres east. He is not an experienced kayaker, and there is fear as he rounds that point alone into the open sea. He thinks about Adrienne Rich's words:

the sea is another story

the sea is not a question of power

I have to learn alone

A collection of eroded and fractured dolerite columns, the island is favoured by pelicans, sooty oystercatchers, little penguins, shearwaters, crested terns, silver gulls and seals. He is fifty metres away from the rocky shore, and although he is actively looking, he hears the seals before he sees them. A guttural bark warns the herd that a lookout has heard the impact of paddle on hull. It is the period between breeding, and these are likely juveniles and sub-adults. Many seals remain immobile on the ledges, a couple sit up, and three are thermoregulating in the water. The swimmers spy-hop to check him out, then porpoise around the kayak.

After he pitched the protected islands kayak project to National Parks staff, there was lots of research: finding papers on silver gulls and antibiotic-resistant bacteria, recovering fur seal numbers, the history of whaling in these southern waters, the archaeology of the region.

Researchers say fur seals are now hauling out on these islands regularly. Australian fur seal numbers were estimated at two hundred thousand before colonization, but they were

intensively hunted between the 1770s and the early 1800s. The population is now around one hundred thousand after full protection in 1983 (McIntosh et al.). They are expert ocean predators, exploiting both the deep ocean off the edge of the continental shelf and the inshore waters around these islands. Their reoccupation of their ancestral habitat indicates their adaptability, but the population recovery coincides with the warming of east coast waters, providing challenges to their ability to thermoregulate and a changing prey base.

His son had told him a story about spearfishing near another island south of here. The boy was swimming along a rock face, looking for abalone, hunting fish. He drifted into an area that was very rich: big schools of small fish, a grey nurse shark, a very big wobbegong shark. A wave broke over him, and before he was oriented in the bubbles, a seal hurtled up to his mask and instantly veered off. Surfacing, his son discovered himself in a small group of floating seals. He floated, dove, barrel-rolled and dolphin-kicked, avoiding eye contact. In his black wetsuit, copying their movements worked briefly and they cavorted around him. Then they drifted back, and soon they were glistening backs and flippers again, lolling in the morning sea. The boy's companion, watching from the rocks, told him she couldn't tell the difference between the human and the seals. The boy was a very, very good diver, so there was no barrier. He relaxed in the wild ocean surges just as the seals relaxed.

The man paddles further through the now south-exposed rolling swells. Rounding the southern side of the island reveals thousands of silver gulls, the largest breeding colony on the east coast. At the peak of breeding season, there will be fifty thousand pairs nesting on these islands. They spiral and drift in the air currents, calling raucously, floating in big rafts offshore, crowding the sleeping seals.

In the pre-dawn sky of June, he had seen the Seven Sisters, the Pleiades, become visible in the east for the first time, signaling the start of winter, and the start of the whale migration. Now is when, as Melville writes, the 'barnacled hulls of the leviathan' (144) swim steadily north. The man has read the details on whaling in Australia and the east coast humpback population's recovery. Sixty years ago, at the end of commercial whaling on the east coast (Noad et al.), an estimated one hundred to three hundred individual humpback whales were left. Those numbers are incomprehensibly small. Some of those individuals are likely still alive, swimming with the now forty thousand who follow this ancient whale-road. In late October as the Seven Sisters set in the west at dawn, the great whales and their new calves will begin the return journey to Antarctica.

Back on the mainland, from the rockshelf, with the whales half a kilometre offshore, he distinctly hears them breathe, a long groaning sigh as the great glistening backs roll over. What thoughts and dreams are in those enormous heads? He feels a desperate need to engage, to respond. Where is Robin Wall Kimmerer's 'grammar of animacy' (48) that we

can find to understand, to connect, again? Thirteenth-century Zen monk Dogen wrote, 'It is not only that there is water in the world, but there is a world in water' (Tanahashi 226). Standing at the tidal edge, he shares breath with the whales, feels their water world touch his bare feet.

Second Day

Midday, midwinter.

The nor-westerly eddies and gusts over tide pools, sending long ripples across grassland and stunted wind-pruned trees. The red volcanic rock is pitted and riven, crusted in yellow lichen. Bones: a pelican femur, a gull's wing and ribcage, a skull. Periodically, a pungent ammoniac smell: decomposing seaweed and guano. Pelicans flare, shuffle and take flight: a clear, steel blue day.

There are twenty-five islands off this long coast, and he is standing on one of them. The landing was not graceful: a boulder beach exposed to the northerly swells, rolling the kayak broadside into the shorebreak.

These islands look uninteresting from the mainland, wind-swept grasslands and rocky expanses. But wading ashore across wet algae-slick boulders, there is a warm silence. As he climbs the slope his muscles relax after the effort of the paddle, and it feels so serene he is shocked. Looking back at the beached kayak from the hilltop he feels simultaneously like a castaway and like he has come home. He thinks this must be an old, old evolutionary memory, the safety of land after long and perilous sea voyages. He sees the island now as astonishingly beautiful, colours bright in the winter sun, warm rocks, a freshwater spring, birds everywhere. Adrienne Rich, again:

*the evidence of damage
worn by salt and sway into this threadbare beauty*

He doesn't want to use the island names: the official names are recent, unimaginative, colonial. The names fall far short of the beauty and wonder, and reveal only a tiny fraction of the histories of these places, human, ecological and geological.

In a sheltered rocky cleft he finds a midden. It looks like tide-heaped piles of shells, but when he pushes his hand into the sand and shells his fingers come away black from the charcoal of old fires. There are whole and broken shells; fish, bird and animal bones; shells that might have been used as jewellery, bones used as tools; and the charcoal of those ancient fires that burned on these shores.

He has read that these shore and island middens are likely up to eight thousand years old, in part reflecting the time the coastline stabilised to its current position as the seas rose at the end of the ice age. The oldest middens here date to twenty thousand years (Bowdler). Many are actively used and still added to by local Yuin people and others. Saltwater people lived through that long period of drowning coastlines, adapting and responding to momentous changes and opportunities as the sea moved landward at rates of up to twenty metres annually, the human and landscape history that oral tradition has accurately rendered (Nunn).

The eroding and disintegrating shells and bones feel both mute and eloquent: testimony to endurance, strength, imagination, observation, response, love, attention, care – and also suffering, fragility, fear and loss. And all those things from both humans and non-humans. A simultaneous epic of lives lived and ended, complex in their depth and detail; and the ordinariness of the middens, scuffed in the dunes and marram grass, eroding through centuries of accumulation and deposit. On this coast and others, many have disappeared entirely, their oyster shells burnt to make lime for colonial mortar.

At the site of the midden, he is looking at the shells themselves where they erode out onto the beach platform and wash back into the sea; just as earlier people did, finding the sometimes-hidden freshwater source, the edible plants, the habitats of marine and terrestrial and tidal species. He sees that middens are made at points of intersection – where there is an ecological, visceral, atmospheric, and aesthetic collision of qualities.

So it is not just the midden, or the shells and bones and charcoal, but standing in the place where others have stood for ten and twenty thousand years, looking out to sea, watching the glitter and flash of the dawn track on the waves, watching dark clouds build on the horizon, seeing the eye of the Rainbow Serpent flickering bright in the lightning flashes. It is the connection between the particularities of this midden and its island, and all the other middens along Australian coasts and rivers, and the ocean creatures and their calcium carbonate shells and bones returning to the components of sea and sand.

His bare feet on the broken shells, he thinks about how geological and human timescales have again coincided. The seas are rising again, and the shells roll and glisten in the tides, many of them with a pearly sheen on their inside surface, and sometimes on the polished external curves.

In a gallery in Tasmania he read about the long tradition of shell-necklace making: ‘with maireeners there is the additional, secret means of removing the outer surface to reveal the inner, magically opalescent sub-surface of the shell, the gem within’ (Gough 83). He sees these layers of iridescent shell in the midden as an archive of millenia of data about climate change, extinctions of some species, the arrival of new species, the sustainability of ancient

harvests, and human and non-human responses to change. The enormous scale and extent of these coastal middens are a commitment to actions of care that support Country to flourish.

On that Tasmania trip, he had walked alone on the beaches of the east coast, each sand footprint reflecting the presence of the people who have done exactly this for ten thousand years on this coast, and twenty thousand years on now-drowned coasts before that. Looking east, he saw a version of the view from millenia ago, after the ocean levels rose, submerging the land bridge and creating the island. It was all horizontal: lines of dry sand, wet sand, shore break, flat rocky islets, turquoise ocean, indigo ocean, horizon, stacked cumulus clouds.

Turning west from that turquoise ocean, landwards, his vision was abruptly halted by different horizontal lines, barbed wire, the farmer's fence posts driven into the heart of a long beachside midden.

He couldn't believe it.

The National Parks' website says, 'these sites are significant, sacred areas to the Tasmanian Aboriginal community and a living museum protected under the *Aboriginal Heritage Act 1975*' (Parks Tasmania). The overt symbolism of the fence is breathtaking: what did the farmer think as they hammered those steel posts into the ancient midden, the line marching down the beach, writing dispossession over ten thousand years of caring for this country?

He realises it is the same here: east to the next island, dark against the horizon, apparently unchanging; west to the steelworks, flarestacks smoking in the midday sun.

Here on this island, this midden is edged with kikuyu, morning glory, coprosma – all weeds on these islands, making nesting difficult for breeding seabirds. Maybe the coprosma is allopathic – nothing grows beneath its canopy – but the ibis roost and nest in it, and there are pelican bones in its shelter. In the last ten years, National Parks staff, Yuin and other local Aboriginal people, contractors and volunteers have planted tens of thousands of native species back on the islands, and cleared areas of dense weeds to re-enable the seabird rookeries.

Where the kayak is beached there are ancient dolerite boulders, and wedged amongst them, volcanic pumice. This is likely from the 2012 undersea eruption off Aotearoa/New Zealand (Jutzeler et al.), that sent a huge raft of fresh volcanic rock drifting on Pacific currents. That pumice took years to reach Australian shores, but he remembers it thick on the tidelines, carrying hitchhiking goose barnacles and other creatures across the seas.

He gets back into the water, slides into the swirling kelp fronds in the channel: a shock of cold water and then hearing and vision make the sudden change. Underwater, the sunlight throws a sinuous glittering net as wave patterns refract and scatter the submerged light. The undersea not-quite-silence fills his head. He dives periodically to investigate the sea floor, picking up marine snails, shining opercula, hermit crab shells. His wetsuited arm reminds him:

This is the place.

*And I am here, the mermaid whose dark hair
streams black, the merman in his armored body*

Third Day

Sunset, midwinter.

At sunset the day's light is inverted: the arch of the sky glows warm and bright while colour fades from the land. The torn white lace of shore foam is edged with dark azure and silver swells, grading out to deep turquoise and the blackened roiling ocean. The sea steadily darkens.

The man used to teach at a nearby Buddhist institute, and sometimes he brought students to the mainland rock shelf here on field trips. One afternoon, one of the monks suggested they all stay on the rock platform for the closing meditation. They sat somewhat self-consciously, crosslegged, spaced out, their breathing slowing. At the end, when he opened his eyes, a raven was perched above them on the rocks, closely watching.

All the corvids are charismatic, and the head of this large Australian raven was tilted towards them, focused and intentional, its throat hackles raised. There were several Bhutanese students, and they all said the presence of the raven was significant. They told the story of the raven crown, worn by Bhutanese kings for more than a hundred years, and Jaroq Dongchen, the raven protector deity. For the rest of the afternoon, the students were full of happiness and excitement that the raven had visited them there.

He loves seeing ravens and was immediately reminded of Edgar Allan Poe's words: 'ghastly grim and ancient raven wandering from the nightly shore' (21). Most ravens nest very high in trees, but on one of the islands a single pair of ravens nests every year in a shallow cave. The nesting is timed to coincide with the nesting season of silver gulls. Ravens are omnivores, predators and carrion eaters, all incredibly important ecological functions. They are thriving in this region.

He launches now into a nor-easterly chop, and right in the shallows small stingrays scoot out of the way. The headland is completely black, and the dark edges of the islands are starting to dissolve into the dark sea. There is a waxing half moon directly overhead.

The swells are bigger than he had thought, and soon he only knows the island is there because periodically there is a moonlit explosion of white surf on the shore. The paddling is more difficult, with the swells seemingly threatening to swing the kayak beam-on to the waves. But as each wave rears up the kayak lifts gracefully over and he starts to relax. There are no birds in the darkness. The surface of the sea is dull silver. Way offshore, the anchored container ships are brightly lit.

He settles into the paddle: drive the left arm down, rotate torso and push with the right, brace with wet feet on the footwells, then smoothly reverse the stroke, over and over. The paddle blades grip the water, the long kayak moves quickly and soon he is hundreds of metres off-shore. A sudden burst of white water in the dark next to him makes him think there are whales, sea monsters, something, and adrenalin surges through his body. But it is just cross-cutting swells refracting around the islands, exaggerated because of the choppy conditions.

This is the saltwater embodied experience, vulnerable to all the elements of the largest thing on the planet. He likes this: kayaking, swimming and diving alone, without the distraction of companionship. The slight (or not so slight) edge of danger keeps him present and focused, not daydreaming or worrying.

He looked at the boating maps before launching, and the bathymetry here reveals very clearly that this cluster of islands once formed an elongated headland, the ocean-flooded valleys between them only two or three metres deep. The eastern edge of the outer island then precipitously drops into twenty metres of ocean: ten thousand years ago, a dramatic forty-metre dolerite cliff. As sea levels now rise once again one island will become two islands, bisected at its lowest point, an isthmus only two metres above high water mark. The small hill on the mainland will also become an island, and the low rocky islet will disappear.

Waanyi writer Alexis Wright argues that as the current apocalypse unfolds, ‘new stories of the land will be composed’. Species disperse, disappear, arrive and aggregate. New species and ecosystems are born, others fade away. The maireeners join the other subfossils washing in the surf, a record of species from long ago. The kelp forests drift south and disappear into the vast, inhospitable deep of the circumpolar current. These processes are not one way, and in the deep past other crossings occurred when these islands were part of a coastal plain.

He thinks of Tongan anthropologist Epele Hau'ofa's famous paper inverting the colonial notion that the Pacific was made up of peoples marooned by the sea on tiny islands. Hau'ofa argued islanders were connected, rather than separated by the sea, that they were an oceanic community: 'conquerors come, conquerors go, the ocean remains, mother only to her children' (155). For quite a while now he too has been a 'sea-struck scholar'.

Walking these island tidelines, kayaking on the sea surface, diving into the rocky underwater canyons, he feels some kind of kin with the seals, the birds, the whales, connecting him to the deep histories of the ocean. This is a sentient world: he is surrounded by intentional ecologies full of other conscious beings. Unfathomed, the great arteries of the ocean currents pulse out from the heart of the deep, enabling and then absorbing all the individual tiny lives and deaths of the planet. The stories of those lives and deaths are archived in ocean and midden and memory and body in this place. All country is generative, and the dynamic, emergent space of these islands brings that strongly into his presence.

What are the possibilities inherent in these glimpses of the iridescence of shells, the glitter of the sun's dawn track across the sea, these fleeting moments of beauty and awe? The nature of these, like meaning in a poem, is not fixed: it is glimpsed and ephemeral, but also generative. Human visual processing systems are designed to notice difference, especially when it is fleeting. This biological design has its roots all the way through human evolution from common ancestors of the marine animals in the middens, the birds, the seals.

He responds to this aesthetic quality because he recognises it within himself. That pathway to recognition feels like one of the ways to engage with the significance and meaning of Country, and the rights of its custodians.

*I came to see the damage that was done
and the treasures that prevail.*

The collision of human and geological timeframes in his lifetime connects to the hearts and minds of the Aboriginal people who saw this happen millennia ago on this coast, and to the hearts and minds of ancient evolutionary ancestors. Aboriginal scholar Tyson Yunkaporta, inviting non-Indigenous people to understand Indigenous ways of knowing, calls this 'being like your place' (248). It is a remarkable phrase, those four words holding so much promise for possible ways into the future.

In his small life the man comes repeatedly to this one small place to learn more, more about the place, more about his relationship with the place and its inhabitants, more about himself. To unearth the connection within him as the tide uncovers the rock shelves.

Whales, seals, seabirds and others are all reclaiming ancestral territories, but these territories have changed and are changing; they are novel ecosystems, with no known analogue. The ocean here is warming with the East Australian Current, the islands have been dramatically changed through human use and are changing again. Species and individuals are on the move. New species are here, and some old ones are gone.

He considers how he had armed himself with ‘facts’ before these excursions to the islands. Now he feels like the more he knows, the more it might be a barrier to real understanding, to connection. Thoreau had said ‘you must approach the object totally unprejudiced’ (67), as if nothing is what you have taken it for. This is known as beginner’s mind in Zen Buddhism: ‘In the beginner’s mind there are many possibilities, but in the expert’s mind there are few’ (Suzuki 1). He considers the ephemeral iridescence, that fear of the deep wild ocean while paddling, that shock of cold water wiping clear his thoughts: he realises now that these are all pathways to finding his beginner’s mind.

These islands, this sea, this coast was and is wild, challenging and beautiful, but also warm and welcoming, a hospitable home that also demands strength, respect and self-reliance. The visceral engagement demanded by the kayak and the cold dive brings him back into his animal body, overriding intellect. The animal body unfolds into beginner’s mind, puts him in the same place as the hunting seals, the migrating whales, the calling birds, the eroding shells, sharing the planet, part of the seascape, direct, unmediated experience.

He has seen the damage that was done, but also the treasures that prevail. The threadbare beauty speaking new stories of the land.

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