

# The Way of Water

Suspended Reason

2025



*Thales enim Milesius, qui primus de talibus rebus quaesivit, aquam dixit esse initium rerum, deum autem eam mentem, quae ex aqua cuncta fingeret...*

Thales of Miletus, who was the first to investigate these matters, said that water was the first principle of things, but that God was the mind that moulded all things from water...

—Cicero, *De Natura Deorum*, 45 BC

# Preface

Things may change, but not for now and not for you; little point in feeling blue, for capital you must accrue, or end up someone else's stew. And those who do not heed the warning, will not wake up in the morning; those who don't protect their eggs, will see them snatched before they hatch, become some predator's ganache. Serengeti rules are such, that fools and antiques make for lunch, and power is as power does, impersonal it bears no grudge.

But all this conflict and this warring's built on sharing of the scoring, built on cells who stuck together; and found in sync some gain, and tethered; and trade and swap and weather the weather, better off when bound together.

So some exploit, some go exploring; some man the gates for others, snoring; some work production, others abduction, using the senses to adapt to fluxion, and surmount obstruction, and prevent destruction: yea, each possesses unique function.

Now none can ever stand alone, dependent are they stitched and sewn, like kings need peasants for their throne, like men need governance to own. For each has gone and specialized, has given up its ears or eyes, its mouth (it cannot feed itself), but lie in waiting for the heart-pumped blood pulsating—each sacrifice eliminating redundant traits, self-regulating.

But wait: for this coordinating sync begins with simple stating—with congregating calculating—with discriminating indicating. Yea, in the beginning was the word, a token from the clement lord, who bid the beasts mind what they heard, and what came next, and what referred; who taught that lions in their roaring tell the world, in each outpouring, health and strength, so others might avoid a goring...

# Dramatis Personae

Jake Sully	Ex-marine turned Na'vi
Neytiri	Na'vi Wife of Jake Sully
Neteyam	Elder son of Jake & Neytiri
Lo'ak	Younger son of Jake & Neytiri
Tuktirey (Tuk)	Daughter of Jake & Neytiri
Kiri	Bio-daughter of Grace, adopted by Sullys
Miles Socorro	Bio-son of M. Quaritch, adopted by Sullys
Miles Quaritch	Reincarnated Marine
General Ardmore	Leader of RDA security forces
Cpl. Wainfleet	Quaritch's second-in-command
Tonowari	Clan chief of the Metkayina
Ronal	Tsahìk of the Metkayina
Tsireya	Daughter of Ronal & Tonowari
Aonung	Younger Son of Ronal & Tonowari
Rotxo	Friend of the Metkayina royal family
Norm Spellman	Human scientist, friend of Jake Sully
Mick Scoresby	CAptain of the SeaDragon whaling vessel
Ian Garvin	Scientist aboard the SeaDragon
Payakan	Outcast Tulkun
Grace Augustine	XenoAnthropologist (quasi-deceased)

# Contents

Forward (Watering Hole) . . . . .	1
<b>Part I</b>	
Worlds Within Worlds . . . . .	3
A New Star in the Sky . . . . .	7
Message from the Past . . . . .	12
Frontier Warfare . . . . .	15
Wound-licking . . . . .	17
Lab Rats . . . . .	20
Lab Rats, part 2 . . . . .	24
Orientation . . . . .	25
Haunted by the Past . . . . .	28
Kidnapping the Future . . . . .	33
<b>Part II</b>	
Theater (Interlude) . . . . .	37
Family is Our Fortress . . . . .	38
Kid, You Got Heart . . . . .	39
A Coastal Welcome . . . . .	43
Breath-holding . . . . .	49
Gone Native . . . . .	51
Banshee-taming . . . . .	55
<b>Part III</b>	
The Way of Water . . . . .	62
Beyond the Break . . . . .	66
A Young Diplomat . . . . .	68

The Outcast . . . . .	71
Alien (The Abyss) . . . . .	72
Eclipse . . . . .	76
Epilepsy, or, The Varieties of Religious Experience . . . . .	79
<b>Part IV</b>	<b>80</b>
Lost in Translation . . . . .	81
The Belly of the Whale . . . . .	85
Lessons of the Elders . . . . .	88
Mother-Hunt . . . . .	91
In the Wake . . . . .	100
Three Brothers Rock . . . . .	101
Collateral Damage . . . . .	103
Cadet Branch . . . . .	105
Mother-Hunt, part 2 . . . . .	107
Brothersport . . . . .	111
The Sinking of the Titanic . . . . .	111
Fiat Lux . . . . .	113
Communion: The Tree of Life . . . . .	115

## Forward (Watering Hole)

Verdi Square, 72nd street, Mannahatta. Sitting in the cold—kept warm by conversation and lingering acid. In the light and shadows of stone, I see a split face, like a Sock & Buskin mask: one half dark, one half white; one half smiling, one half sad. Sun & moon; comedy & tragedy.

Ragged says that tropical and beach-themed movies sell better in winter months, ‘least at high latitudes, and shivering we agree. We walk a few blocks to get out of the cold, and hydrate at a parkside dive bar. Crack jokes about the films; share favorite lines. Barabajagal’s: “If you can’t get out of it, get into it.” But then, he’s a practicing analyst.

I feel so blest on this day of days—to be sober, to have made the journey, to be back on this side of the fence. To have robbed the idol and made it back alive, past the threshold guardians and the blowdarts from the walls.

We laugh and drink and place bets. What’s Cameron’s birth order? I say youngest; Baraba’s money’s on middle child: “Middle children are initiated; then they pivot and initiate in turn.” Born outsider, become insider. Go-betweens who recognize their own precarity in younger, more peripheral members. (The answer: Cameron’s eldest-born.)

Another beer, another bet. Is Cameron a psychonaut ? Here we’re undivided. Baraba—sipping a beer; stepping out to pee—cracks how we’re all earthworms, just fancy tubes: taking in the world at one end, passing it out on the other. “*Tubetanic. Tube Lies.* It all makes sense now.” Water’o’chaos, great flood, a human hubris: sunk undersea. (Not so far from Ys.)

Peter Bradshaw, at the *Guardian*, would go on to call *Way of Water* a trillion-dollar screensaver. Robbie Collins, for *The Telegraph*, would describe it as “being waterboarded with turquoise cement.”

And I would watch it a dozen times, and spend months scribing details, and editing prose, and none of my friends could understand why.

# **Part I**

## Worlds Within Worlds

The film's first shots are of Pandora. Of the *Ayram alusing*—the floating Hallelujah Mountains, engulfed in mist—dripping and saturated—clouds condensing into aerial rivers, which cascade off the cliffs. Of the four-winged, blue and green *fkio* soaring beneath the Tree of Souls.

The story of *Avatar* starts and ends with Pandora. Deep in REM sleep, thirty years ago, Cameron dreamed not of characters, or of conflict, but of an ecosystem—a silvan vision of bioluminescence; of luciferin, reacting with luciferase. That's where *Avatar* began for its director, and that's where *Avatar* begins for us. Sunlight peeking through vines; explosively colorful fauna. Here's the thing about drama, about monomyth, about narrative. All stories are eco-stories; all hero's journeys are really narratives about ecology. The causal ripples, the structural interdependence, the pressures and tides. The hero is significant because of how he alters the balance. All heroes—and all villains—are either disruptors, protectors, or restorers of equilibrium.<sup>1</sup> This is why all monomyths begin with departures from reality: the arrival of a falling star, or a new stranger in town: a causal ripple which journeys through time and space to the hero's world. The ready-at-hand becomes present-to-hand. The inherited rituals grow maladaptive. The old gods walk again.

Our virtual camera moves through the canopy, and then the undergrowth—from macroscopic to microscopic—from the view of the Skypeople, to the view on the ground. A *nantang* viperwolf shimmers cross a branch. Sully to narrate: “The forests of Pandora hold many dangers. But the most dangerous thing about Pandora? Is you may grow to love her.” This, over close-ups of Sully’s wife Neytiri, so you know he’s speaking double. Both “woman” and “indigenous” stand for “close to nature,”<sup>2</sup> and set up the basic symbolic indices of our story: white man—standing for a literally alienated civilization—falls in love with an

---

<sup>1</sup>Sometimes disruption is a necessary precursor to restoration. Sometimes destruction is a necessary part of preservation. Sometimes the hero's disruption is the very destructive force the ecology needs protecting from. Sometimes the hero is the protector against the villain's disrupting force.

<sup>2</sup>Pandora's Box is often likened to a vagina, and there is evidence in the original myth that this connection was intentional, built into the symbolism. Dentata, really: breathtaking beauty with a bite. Dillardian fecundity, that puts up a fight.

Alternatively, we can read into the moon's namesake the myth's notion of box-balance: all the evils and sicknesses of the world, matched only by hope. The Na'vi's against the evil spirit of mankind, the Pandora's Box of the RDA arrival. Pandora herself was made from clay, just like the *pithos jar* that has since been systemically mistranslated as *box*.

indigenous princess—who represents embodiment and connection. I don't make the rules; these aren't essential or inherent traits of the demographics in question. Historical contingency has given these symbols their meaning and who are we to argue?

The freckles across Neytiri's nose and cheeks and brow are like a constellation of stars, and she stalks the forest silent, belly engorged by the child within. The fertility of woman and earth here united by a pronoun. *Mother*. If you know Cameron's work, then you know something of what that concept means for him. In the dark, the stars glow ever-brighter, descending down Neytiri's arms and hands, vaguely elvish. The Na'vi are tall and slender, like dancers, and that's part of the web of symbols too. To symbolize is to typify—all compressions leave something out—but the good director complicates, adds to our field of types. Tweaks and extends the metaphors that structure our thinking.

Sully continues his story: "We sing the songcords to remember, each bead a story in a life. A bead for the birth of our son." The songcords, like Incan *khipu*, are musical mnemonic devices, its knotted beads recording its wearer's life. Within the flashback of memory, we see Sully, clan-chief of the Omatikaya, hold up his first-born Neteyam to the rays of crown-piercing light—a sort of Simba, bathed in Holy Spirit, and this is the symbol-web too: The clan turn their heads to follow the upheld Son, incanting Neteyam's name. And we see Neytiri, fingering the beads, rosary-like, by the campfire: animating power, bringer of structure and a promise of destruction to come. She sings to herself, in a quiet kind of prayer.

Music is the god channel, spirit manifesting in ever-changing form. Splitting and blending; varying, integrating. One theme is extinguished; another emerges from the silence and the empty space. Spirit vying with itself—strife and life and death all means of prolonging the song, the story. There is ultimate victory in local defeat, and ultimate defeat in local victory. *Repetition is death; only novelty replenishes*. A Ship of Theseus for a changing sense of self, of family, of relation through time. And a note or chord that sounds utterly alien, utterly dissonant? Might find itself utterly at home, a few bars later. The Great Improviser modulates his song to incorporate error—to erase its status as error—a status only determined in the rear-view.<sup>3</sup>

---

The evils are contained by the boundaries of the jar, but when that boundary is unsealed, they escape, initiating a causal ripple of strife.

<sup>3</sup>Miles Davis: "It's the next note that you play that determines if [the note before is] good or bad." Herbie Hancock: "It was a really hot night, the music was on. Right in the middle of Miles's solo, I played the wrong chord. Completely wrong. It sounded like a big mistake. And Miles paused for a second, and then he played some notes that made

Sully: “A bead for when we adopted our daughter, Kiri, born of Grace’s avatar”—mystery origin, given Grace is dead, her avatar sealed in a test-tube. *Immaculate conception; a virgin birth.* “A bead for the first communion with Eywa. The people say we live in Eywa, and Eywa lives in us.” Parts connecting to whole, connecting with each other through whole. Children at war, gathering round their mother, recalling relatedness, a shared inheritance.

Another son is born—Lo’ak—and a daughter, Tuk. “Happiness is simple, but who would’ve thought a jarhead like me could crack the code.” The warrior has found peace; Herakles does not slay his children; we see him playing with the little ones, telling stories of the old times, in their canopy’s hammock. Telling how the wardogs, the profiteers, were defeated and sent home to Earth—their lives spared in a show of grace. But many of the scientists were allowed and chose to stay. Cameron makes a lot, in this film, of contrasting warrior and scientist—mainly through the avatar of Kiri. But he’ll also take pains to pit the traditional warrior (integrated, vigorous, spiritual) against the modern-day marine (myopic, rigorous, mechanical)—just as he pits the Na’vi healer-priests (holistic, mystical, embodied) against the human techies (analytic, reductionist, deflationary). Sully’s arc in the first film is from marine to warrior; it comes with an expansion of perspective, consciousness, and responsibility.

Now that we’ve been intro’d to the Na’vi kids, Sully briefs us on Spider: the son of Skypeople, abandoned when his father was killed by Na’vi in the war. (It’s crazy how Jake calls human beings Skypeople, like he isn’t one of them.) “Orphaned by the war, he was raised by the lab guys.” (Where war destroys, the scientists repair.) “He wasn’t part of our family. He was like a stray cat constantly around. Inseparable from our kids.” That’s Jake’s perspective, as an ex-Skyperson himself—and the perspective of his kids, who are innocents. What does Neytiri think? “Stray cat” would be generous. “To Neytiri he would always be one of them. Alien.” She turns to Sully, says: “He belongs with his own kind.”

But who *are* Spider’s kind, anyway? The bio-son of Quaritch; the adopted son of Sully. Every element in Cameron’s *Avatar*—and in Cameron’s films generally—is geared to complicate the family/alien dichotomy. Spider’s a mongrel, a hyphen, a slash. But to the children, he’s one of them. And insofar as Spider will be treated as family, in this film, he

---

my chord right. He made it correct. Miles didn’t hear it as a mistake. He heard it as something that happened. An event. Part of the reality of what was happening at that moment, and he dealt with it. Since he didn’t hear it as a mistake, he felt it was his responsibility to find something that fit.”

will act like family, and insofar as he is treated as outsider, as Skyperson? He will act like a Skyperson. And so Neytiri will bring a piece of her own doom upon her, in this film. She is still provincial, in certain ways. She is open-minded enough to marry a freak—to adopt a freak—to give birth to freaks—but she herself has never quite *been* a freak, never bridged two worlds herself, in her own body. She's always been an Omaticaya. She always will be.

Already the lines are being drawn: inside and outside, who is part of la Familia, who's adopted or biological, who's a person and who's a pet and who's a beast of burden. Wanted and unwanted, valued and less valued. Whose body is adapted to the planet's atmosphere; who needs to wear an oxygen mask (Miles "Spider" Socorro) every moment of his life. All of them are freaks in one sense or another. Sully is an avatar, his children are hybrids of avatar and Na'vi, Kiri is an immaculate conception, and Neytiri is the freak who agreed to start this family. Even before Sully got his avatar body he was a paraplegic, someone not quite whole by army standards. It is a family of outsiders who find themselves somehow in possession of immense local standing—the Toruk Makto, and the heiress to the Omaticaya clan.

(It is probably important that in these films—in these Pocahontas narratives—the white Westerner is an untitled commoner, while the indigenous love interest is royalty. Maybe it's a form of wish fulfillment; maybe it's the practical fact that no monarch would be caught dead hacking through undergrowth; maybe it's an unconscious projection of the relative worth we ascribe to the races. Either way, the titleless soldier-slash-frontiersman must have his excellence *revealed*; the native princess *recognizes* something in him, a courage and nobility which she marks as royal, and which makes him a worthy mate.)

There are hints of strife among the children as we watch them grow up, watch them play, echoing battles past, portending battles to come. They arguing over property, a toy tetrapteron, tugging it back and forth while they shout: "It's mine!" "I hate you," cries Lo'ak. "I hate you times infinity," Tuk rebuts. Dad steps in and softly polices them, "Don't make me come over there." Children's games like a microcosm of adult conflict, but is materialism the way of the Na'vi, or is this Sully's influence showing?<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup>Brian Hayden, archaeologist with experience on four continents, reports: "I can say categorically that the people of *all* the cultures I have come in contact with exhibit a strong desire to have the benefits of industrial goods that are available. I am convinced that the 'nonmaterialistic culture' is a myth... We are all materialistic." The nonmaterialistic culture myth: a projection of our own envied antitheses onto the Other.

Now we get a scene for the parents in the audience—of “date nights away from the kids,” Jake and Neytiri performing aerial acrobatic (vaguely erotic) on their banshees. This is the beginning of many nods to the film’s intended audience of nuclear families: an all-ages blockbuster, its characters are built to be relatable to both generations, and their problems, relationships, and interactions are partially reflections of modern family life. Me? I kinda hate this aspect of the movie, it breaks immersion and comes across corny. But I’m willing to cede that it says something true about Sully’s lingering—and perhaps unshakeable—earth-bound interpretations. The way he domesticates and naturalizes all that’s mystical and strange about his new, adopted world. Fat chance that the Na’vi date, but whatever they do, Jake can’t be bothered to tell the difference.

But this text isn’t about what I like or dislike. It’s about the film. Or not even. It’s easy to wonder: Why write or even read a novella-length monograph about an *Avatar* sequel? I say: None of this is about *Avatar*. All of it is metaphor for the everyday web of conflicts and relations that we are all, irretrievably, enmeshed in.

## A New Star in the Sky

“Thrice happy are they who, inhabiting some yet undiscovered island in the midst of the ocean, have never been brought into contaminating contact.”<sup>5</sup>

“Happiness is simple.” Happiness as resting protocol. Happiness as an equilibrium that feels like it’ll last forever. Everything suddenly perfectly right. This is how moods can be: Feeling like they’ll never end. Projected onto the world, cheery map collapsing territory. Hence depressive ontology and its claim on nihilistic realism: the depressive feels not that he is depressed, but that he has discovered the true nature and meaningless nature of the world. There are kinds of happiness that make people believe in God: not that they have fought for and found a haven of safety, but that the world is a safe and loving place.

But, well—“Baby we were born to die,” as the Boss sings it—and equilibria? Are made to be disrupted. Every regime, eventually succeeded. The question is: On what (and whose) terms does succession play out?

---

<sup>5</sup> Melville, *Typee*. And for a sci-fi reference point, compare *Star Trek*’s Prime Directive: That the technologically advanced Federation not contact, or otherwise interfere with, less advanced worlds.

“Entropy increases with melting, vaporization or sublimation.” Apropos the title-at-hand, see also “Entropy increases when solids or liquids dissolve in water.” Heat causes the atoms to vibrate faster and faster until their bonds break apart, and re-bond with oxygen atoms, and float upward as gas. Connections are broken, stabilities destabilized.

“Happiness is simple. But the thing about happiness? It can vanish in a heartbeat.” Sully and Neytiri are lying together in the darkness when they suddenly sit up, their eyes shooting skyward. A new star in the sky that brightens and glints and grows. “That could only mean one thing”—life, crossing the great desert-threshold of space to reach this planetary amniote, this oasis, this bubble-ecology of the void like an apple. Here comes appetite, searching for energy. A causal ripple. A stranger, riding into town.

At first it’s a godly light, a star over Bethlehem. Then, from holy white and blue, a gun-metal gray: Great ships, lowering landing modules, beams of fire shooting out below the rockets as they land and napalm everything for miles. Huge billowing clouds of flame, the megafauna panicking, fleeing in every direction but without hope—a sequence which evokes nothing if not the aboriginal conquest of Australia.<sup>6</sup>

This is a film, Disney funding notwithstanding, that depicts what it really means to be an organism: the darker, tribal, “chthonic” realities that

---

<sup>6</sup>Quickly, but this is important to get out of the way: the modern West idealizes pre-European indigenous populations as pacifists living in uncomplicated harmony with an Edenic nature. There are shades of comparative truth in this picture: nomads may live more lightly off of land; slow-changing cultures keep better equilibrium with environments. But our best attempts at serious historiography show that geo-engineering, deforestation, environmental destruction, species extinction, and agricultural breeding programs were all common in the pre-Columbian Americas. If there is a difference between indigenous and Western peoples, it is of degree and not of kind—of situation and techno-capacity, more than disposition. It is probably time to dispense with the simplistic view that *Avatar* depicts the “true, essential barbarity” and parasitism—the “carcinogenic” quality, quoting Sontag—of Western peoples and cultures, at least in contrast with some inherent, mutualistic, quasi-Zen enlightenment of indigenous Na’vi. Cameron’s Na’vi—or at least, the Na’vi as they are commonly interpreted—are closer to Western caricatures of “indigenius” than to flesh-and-blood organisms. They have the feel of a colonial-era, quasi-Christian moral construct—as contra Darwin as creationism. And Cameron has repeatedly hinted that darker, more violent “fire” tribes also inhabit Pandora, and will make an appearance in future films—this at least being faithful to the cultural and moral heterogeneity of native peoples across the Americas. There is no monolith known as the American Indian, though historical compression, and pragmatic indifference, conspire to make one. There are the Republican Iroquois (*Haudenosaunee*), and there are the Imperialist Aztec (*Mexica*), and there is a world of difference between. Western homogenization of indigenous peoples as culturally fungible reminds one of nothing less than the common American error of believing Africa to be a country instead of continent.

lie beneath our progressive, post-Christian moral intuitions. What it means to be subject to the sick and sublime logic of natural selection. Some organisms, blessed with chloroplasts, derive most of their energy freely, from the sun. The rest of us—even the herbivores—must destructure other forms of life in order to keep on living. Must tear and chew and grind and bathe in acid. This is food: the decomposition of complex structure, an increase in entropy. Organization converted into heat. Making a mess of the Other, in order to keep your internals orderly. Keeping the fire of the self burning by breaking down cell walls and molecular bonds. Even for plants, life is far from peaceful. Real estate conflicts are inexorable; roots battle over access to water and quality soil; leaves shade each other out, and struggle for sun through a crowded canopy. Flowers mimic and compete for pollinators in elaborate deceptions, emit false chemical signals to sabotage the growth patterns of rival plants. Amidst this conflict, cooperation abounds, no question: trade networks between evergreen and deciduous trees, mutualisms between the plants and the bacteria that help feed them. Nature is not only war. And war involves elaborate cooperation. This is what the microbiologist Lynn Margulis understood, in her work on endosymbiosis. Nature is as thoroughly defined by cooperation as conflict, and neo-Darwinian tales of selfish genes are partial narratives. I will try to argue that if you look closely enough, conflict and cooperation are revealed to be not opposed but self-constituting, interdependent processes. By the same token of group selection, if you're not in you're out, and if you're not with us, you're against us: the fact of multicellularity and cooperation, the emergence of teams and family units, does not change the ubiquity of warfare. It merely re-draws battle lines. It merely makes the warfare more elaborate.

Back to the plot; back to Pandora. It's unclear whether all this burning and killing is intentional, or just a byproduct of needing a large, flattened clearing to land the rockets. Either way the destruction is a feature, not a bug. Canopies provide cover for Na'vi; a barren waste gives the new base visibility for miles; it's a strategy straight from the Vietnam playbook. And the megafauna, from a military's perspective? Another a set of threats, another possible complication best eliminated—nothing more. And if the scientists on the command ship complain, well, that's because they've invested their identities in paper wars back home; fuck 'em, and full steam ahead. There are advantages to this lack of sentiment, this lack of aesthetic consideration. One advantage is survival.

Then a module like a black monolith touches down on scorched earth, and a cavernous metal hangar door extends into a ramp. Amidst the cinders and windborne sparks and the orange glow of Shiva, god of death, the great

machinery rolls out accompanied by metal mechas. *Terminators*. Cameron's been here before. Like forces of Mordor: a fiery renewal; machines enslaved to an idol. (And motifs in Horner's score, here, echo Shore's themes for Peter Jackson—another nod.)

Consumer of worlds, which loves only calories and gigawatts. Neytiri, wife of Sully, daughter and royal of the Omatikaya, watches from distant cliffs, senseless in her pain, tears streaming as smoke billows; morning comes, but no light penetrates the darkened sky.<sup>7</sup>

"Entropy increases with melting, vaporization or sublimation." Heat causes atoms to vibrate faster and faster until their bonds break. Connections are broken, stabilities de-stabilized. Enthalpy coincides with an increase in entropy, united by the Gibbs free energy principle. *Prayer! Sacrifice! Service! to the Goddess of Entropy, the Lord & Lady of the house. Goddess, whose only counter is prolongation and economy! Goddess, indefatigable and invincible; the only victory against her is born of grace!*

Now there is only darkness. The screen is entirely black. And then? A small, blurry, indistinct light. A new star in the sky. Above and around you, a large, white, overhead halo. Goggle-and-masked faces emerge from

---

<sup>7</sup>This, of course, mirrors the "pave paradise, put up a parking lot" images of the original *Avatar*. Some key themes in that film were clearcutting and legibility. The "mystery of the forest"—a complex, organic and bottom-up order—mowed down, replaced with the top-down, gridded and metric "avenues and boulevards of the plantation." Sarah Perry writes at *Ribbonfarm*, in "An Ecology of Beauty and Strong Drink," of metaphorical forms of colonial clearcutting, and their destructive effects on evolved and stable indigenous cultures:

When a mature natural ecosystem is destroyed by fire, clearcutting, or plowing, a particular process of succession follows. First, plants with a short life history that specialize in colonization emerge; these first-stage plants are often called weeds, or "weedy ephemerals," and make up a large number of agricultural pest species...

Ordinarily, rituals evolve slowly and regularly, reflecting random chance as well as changes in context and technology. From time to time, there are shocks to the system, and an entire ritual ecosystem is destroyed and must be repaired out of sticks and twigs.

Recall that in literal clearcutting, short-life-history plants flourish. They specialize in spreading quickly, with little regard for long-term survival and zero regard for participating in relationships within a permanent ecosystem. After a cultural clearcutting occurs, short-life-history rituals such as drug abuse flourish. To take a very extreme example, the Native American genocide destroyed many cultures at one blow. Many peoples who had safely used alcohol in ceremonial contexts for centuries experienced chronic alcohol abuse as their cultures were erased and they were massacred and forcibly moved across the country to the most marginal lands.

the shadows, peering down at you. “You’re fine. Stay calm.” They shine flashlights in your eyes. You blink, groggy and startled. And who are you? Apparently a berserker—a hyper-aggressive, roid-raging marine. Reincarnated as a “Recombinant”—the body of an avatar, the mind and memory of a KIA marine. A mutant, a mulatto. A hybrid. The worst thing; the thing you despised. You, become like the race-traitor Sully.

Quaritch is a Victorian British name, for whatever that’s worth. There’s 19th century novel called *Colonel Quaritch*, whose titular character served abroad in British colonial wars, across India and Egypt. A more sympathetic character than our Quaritch, but still occupying the same brutal position as occupier. “The terror of what in defence of his own life he was forced to do revolted him even in the heat of a fight.”

What in defense we are forced to do. Choose to do, I guess. But in a them-or-me logic that most of us understand, knowing we’d make the same call. The only unusual thing about 19th century Quaritch is his sense of conscious conscience, and the extremity of his self-defensive acts. The basic logic of defensive maneuvering—aggression born of fear—is central to our toolkit, a move usually repressed below the level of clear awareness. So that we maneuver in pre-emptive ways that advantage ourselves at the cost of others, and strike threats before they may strike us, and in general choose, in those tradeoffs between personal suffering and the suffering of others, that more abstract latter form, which takes cognitive work to simulate, in contrast to the vivid acuity of personal suffering, which takes cognitive work to transcend.

“Let there be light.” Our 22nd century Quaritch awakens—is virgin-born—to torches. These films have all sorts of parallels to the *Alien* franchise, and these laboratory “birth” scenes, like the hypersleep-style avatar coffins, are one of them. Even the ship’s operating room looks like a Ridley Scott set. The marine’s first response to his awakening involves punching out the nurse attendants, flipping table trays, and knocking shit onto the ground. In other words: panic. The human nurses flee, calling for security and sealing the room. Other, Na’vi-looking bodies come restrain the Colonel. “It’s me, Corporal Wainfleet!” one shouts, looking him in the eyes. A name is a powerful thing. Quaritch’s feral teeth relax. These are *his* marines, *his* guys—like sons to him—their minds transplanted into Na’vi bodies. He’ll accept in them what he can’t accept in himself. He admires his new, sharpened canines in the glass’s mirror-like surface. The fangs of a predator. Behind the glass, attendants watch him, hidden by glare, a two-way mirror. Underneath the surface, there is always another layer. And there are so many surfaces in this film, two-dimensional barriers which, bro-

ken, reveal endless worldly depth. The surface of skin, the surface of sea, and an ecology below.

Those he believed were his enemies turned out to be his allies. They looked him in the eye, and they said, You know me. And those he saw as threats turned out to be his agents, partisans, his right-hand men—extension of his own figurative body.

## Message from the Past

Now, on-screen, we see this new, Recombinant Quaritch getting oriented. See him watch a screen of his own, a screen that shows his previous human self staring into a screen, captured by a webcam. Identity and virtuality recurse, as Quaritch's past self briefs him on his present: "The idea is to get the minds of the saltiest on-world operators, like Corporal Wainfleet over there, and your humble narrator, into recombinant bodies... Loaded with my memory and my charm. What you won't remember is my death, because it hasn't happened yet, and it ain't gonna." Everyone believes their equilibrium will never be disrupted.

Recombinant bodies, or "recombs." Lab rats, really. They call it Project Phoenix. As the screen-nested Quaritch-ghost speaks, a coffin-like link unit called the Soul Drive opens its lid behind him, and the Corporal steps out; another layer of background becomes framed focal point. And behind the orientation screen, over the top? The present-day Corporal, floating peaceful in zero-G. It's hard to describe and hard to envision these layers—this series of rug-pulls like waking from a dream, only to wake again—but if you've seen the film, you'll know the moment I'm talking about. What's important is the takeaway and the takeaway is simple: Look at all these layers of past and present, virtuality and connection, all these nestings and simulacra. Look how the grounding of any figure can perpetually recede. There's a trick in *vajrayana* meditation, to open up awareness, that works like this: Notice a figure, now notice the ground against which the figure stands. Take this ground as figure and repeat.

We've gone on too many digressions, are moving too slowly—so, quickly now, for the last time, let's talk hybrids. Because every important character in this film—with the possible exception of Neytiri—is some synthetic, in-between species. "Freaks," to get technical. It's common, especially in conservationist circles, to think of hybrids as somehow unnatural. (A similar fear of status-quo change underlies the labeling of "invasive" species.) Downstream, maybe, of our simplified, middle-school biology understanding

of speciation. We tend to see species as something pure, a natural, Platonic joint in the world. An organism by definition cannot reproduce with other species. (So the simplification goes.) True, hybridity is somewhat uncommon, and fertile hybrids are all the more rare. But rarity, on human timescales, can be a dominant factor of change and adaptation at an evolutionary timescale. This, too, Margulis understood. An event may occur once in a million years and still be transformative. And yet three new *Senecio* species (Yorkwort, Oxford ragwort, and Welsh groundsel) emerged in Britain from hybridization in just a few centuries. These hybrids endlessly cross with one another, back and forth, such that even the original, hybridized species typically contain small amounts of other species' genes. Such hybridization is becoming all the more common with modernity, in large part the result of what Chris D. Thomas calls "New Pangea"—the way humans have bridged previous buffer zones between ecosystems via trade and migration patterns. In other words, these hybrids result from greater connection. And *Avatar*, as a franchise about ecology, is also equally a franchise about connection (tantra, link, queue): ecology at its most fundamental is the study of the ways that organisms' fates are bound up, and interdependent.

There are serious scientists who believe that *Homo sapiens* are a back-cross between monkeys and pigs. The crackpot who advanced this idea, Eugene McCarthy, was perhaps the world's leading authority on avian hybrids, authoring the *Oxford Handbook of Avian Hybrids*. Less controversially, all life forms are hybrids; all species are mongrels; all "humans" contain Neanderthal and Denisovan and Homo Sapien and viral DNA. Mitochondria once live autonomously before they were absorbed to become the cell's powerhouse. The same is true of chloroplasts in plant cells. Without hybridity, there are no eukaryotes; without eukaryotes, there is no higher life. Sex—the hybridization of individual genomes—is the dominant form of reproduction; and even the clonal, binary fission of bacteria is supplemented by prokaryotes' promiscuous swapping of DNA strands. "The idea of a tree of life should be replaced by the image of a more tangled mosaic of interacting lives in which [different species] may continue to exchange some genes for millions of years after they first separate."<sup>8</sup>

Every known organism is an extensive system of symbiosis. One cannot conceive of the concept of the supposedly individual or atomic organism without a concept of symbiosis, both at microscopic and macroscopic levels. But our natural impulses towards conceptual purity, toward ontological essentialism, mislead us into genocide and holocaust, culling so-called Amer-

---

<sup>8</sup>Chris D. Thomas, *Inheritors of the Earth*.

ican “beefalo” bison for possessing small amounts of cattle DNA—even as the much-protected European bison is itself a full-blown cross between auroch cattle and steppe bison. These essentialisms, no matter how “benign” or “progressive” should scare us; they are primordially fascistic in their violent upholding of some “original,” pure order falsely projected onto a nature constantly in flux.

The apparent opposite of hybridizing connection is rigid opposition, conflict, a keeping apart, “gardens need walls.” And yet, from what is synthesis born if not the opposition between antithesis and thesis? “You are my enemy now, and you shall be my brother-in-war.” Chase someone long enough, battle someone long enough, and they’re the closest thing you’ve got to a peer. It’s why Bond villains endlessly postpone on killing Bond. “You are my enemy now, and you shall be my brother-in-war.” Cue the ghost of Quaritch, speaking through the screen, still obsessed with his old rival<sup>9</sup>: “Well, whatever happened, if you’re any clone of mine you’ll be looking for payback, and Jake Sully would be the top of that list. Remember kid, a marine can’t be defeated. Oh you can kill us, but we’ll just regroup in hell. *Semper fi!*” Colonel out. Two fingers extended, shutting off the screen. One-way transmissions without feedback, passing themselves forward, tiling themselves across the universe. The marine boot will stamp itself across the stars because the logic of power does not need justification; it is definitional. And those at the top of an ecology may grow fat and complacent on the milk of their land, and the hungry will inherit the earth. No sacrifice too great, *semper fi*. Where the decadent sacrifice nothing, and lose everything, the marine will sacrifice everything, and therefore lose nothing.

Already we have the revenge cycles, the feedback loops of blood for blood. Some people think blood feud is a cultural construct; this is backwards; even vervet monkeys blood feud, and inherit the sins of their fathers. Grievances passed through generations. Culture is built to suppress blood feuds, to put a tamper on tribalism. The Laws of the Ancestors. The Tulkun Way. The Sermon on the Mount.

Already we have marine-as-ethos, marine-as-meme, marine-as-mindset, *semper fi*. Power and nothing but it; the taste for pleasure replaced by tough perseverance. A boot, a mantra, self-replicating, printing itself across the universe. Marine as demon, marine as transpersonal, parasitic intelligence. And then there was darkness. Cut to a marine squad, led by an ex-USM and reorganized to USM principles. Operatic music plays, like something from *Phantom Menace*’s duel on Naboo, in the Theed palace generators.

---

<sup>9</sup>Insert wormhole to “rival” etymology discussion in water sections.

A group of Na’vi plummet from the sky on their banshees like starfighters, flying through the forest canopy. They wield the weapons of the Skypeople—hybridization, in service of survival.

## Frontier Warfare

The convoy ambush is straight out of *Call of Duty* or *Red Dead Redemption*. The comp-animated tracking shots; orange tracers from the automatic weapons; slow-motion hit-stop as the Mag-Lev Jungle Train flips head over heels, balloons into billowing fire. (Solid into gas.)

It’s a train robbery of old, straight from the fables of a fifties Western. Natives ride in on horseback all war cry and hoof-stomp—except the horses are direhorses—“nectarivores,” in Cameron’s canon—and the warriors carry TOXON-81 Missile Launcher—descendents of the FIM-92 Stinger launchers used in our modernday U.S. military. This, technically, is not allowed—the Na’vi religion prohibits metal weaponry—but the Toruk Makto is given the right to bend sacred rules in exceptional circumstances, and an existential threat is such a circumstance.

Now Sully and his pack of warriors from the sky, armed with Recom M69 assault rifles. The *Avatar Visual Dictionary* tells us that these guns can take 0226-LSAR ammo—rounds that shatter on impact, break into painful killings shards and deal lethal hemorrhage. These are the same guns that Quaritch—Sully’s brother-in-war—wields throughout the film.

As the train somersaults and explodes, Neytiri shoots hovercraft down from the air as triumphant music plays. Her bowstring has enough tension to pierce bulletproof glass. The Wiki informs me that the hovercraft are Aerospatiale SA-9 Kestrel rotorwings, but we can call them just rotorwings or Kestrels. Jake machine-guns down a Kestrels pilot as Neytiri sticks another with her arrows, whooping and hollering with their weapons held overhead. Up in the clouds on banshees, younger brother Lo’ak attempts to convince older brother Neteyam that they should descend, should join the fray. This pattern plays out over and over in the film, and my only defense is a heavy sigh. I’d rather not recap the dynamic in detail so I’ll be brief. Both of the sons are torn between warming the bench and listening to coach—or else defying their father and proving themselves men. Lo’ak wants to prove himself more than he wants to follow dad; Neteyam wants to follow dad more than he wants to prove himself. But Lo’ak has a talent for forcing the issue—and cries “Don’t be a wuss” before swooping down, toward the action. It’s not just your life you risk, when you pull this shit, and Lo’ak

will learn this soon enough, the hard way. Neteyam's forced to follow—protectively or egoistically, you choose. I find it a bit tiring, the taunting and goading, the predictable disaster that repeatedly follows Lo'ak's impulsive involvement. But I guess what plot needs to teach him is the logic of connection.

A sidebar—Lo'ak's hair, the two braids over his right eye, echo Eddie in *Terminator: Judgment Day*—a way to signal teen angst and rebellion and self consciousness and the partial blindness that results.

The Na'vi, including the supposedly pacifist scientists, are raiding the train for weapons and ammunition. Norm barks out commands: "We're taking the whole case: mags, RPGs, the stingers." Lo'ak jumps into the mix in search of a machine gun, wanting a piece of the prize, as Neteyam hustles to keep pace. Papa Sully spots them, just as more gunships turn the corner, start launching missiles at the raiding party. One of the blasts knocks over Neteyam and Jake goes searching amidst the same airborne cinders.

Look how, in the wreckage, panicking, Sully scans over a dead or dying body of a fellow Na'vi warrior without a second glance. He doesn't check vitals, doesn't pull the body off the wreckage. He just scans for his son's face, doesn't see it, and moves on. And when he finds his son, all his attention stays there. This is what it means to care. This is what it means to love. This is why love, famously, is scandalous to progressive culture. Love says: These people matter more than others. This family logic goes way deeper than any lip service paid to equal treatment. There is a line between a neighbor and a son, a difference that cashes out in disparate action, in "privilege," in priority. This is the meaning of care; this is the meaning of triage.

All stories are eco-stories; all myths are tales of ecologies; and the hero is a metonym for the rippling force which sets an ecology back to equilibrium. This is a story about two peoples—about tribes and clans, families and lineages linked by blood and mutual debt. The boundaries of these groups' bubbles, and the bubbles' co-penetration, and the intrusion of the foreign in the familiar.

Sully spots his son, turns him over. He's okay—or okay enough to earn a reprimand. "What the hell were you thinking?" the Father demands. He was thinking of hell.

Somewhere, Lo'ak looks on—learning his lesson, but not fast enough. Blood, staining his brother's chests. One of those portents you're lucky to get—the near escapes that say: *Change your life—or else.*

## Wound-licking

Lo'ak, on the other hand, is like a young Jake before he became an avatar. Possibly before he lost the use of his legs. Reckless to a fault. Screwing up constantly. But very, very brave. Strong Heart, No Fear, but Stupid, as it were. It's natural Jake wouldn't like seeing that part of himself. Neytiri isn't as hard on [Lo'ak], because she loves Jake, so of course she loves her son who is like him.<sup>10</sup>

Strong heart, no fear, but stupid. Ignorant like a child. That's how Neytiri described Jake, when they first met. When he was just an avatar; when they were on opposite sides; before their little Romeo and Juliet act changed the course of the war. Jake is still stupid—most of the movie's plot revolves around his stupidity—but he's less impulsive. Less eager and willing to see blood drawn. He is a father, and there are stakes in the world now, stakes greater than his own piddling hide.

Back at the village, hidden in a cave system of the floating *Ayram alusing*—the Hallelujah Mountains—Tuk playacts with a toy banshee: “Attack! Attack! Gotcha!” I remember, in *High Noon*, the Gary Cooper Western? Where the kids are roleplaying with finger guns. That's how they learn; that's how you know they're learning. Cue Miles: “I'm definitely faster when I'm blue... And the animals respect me more,” as Kiri helps him apply Na'vi-like chest stripes with dye. Using pigment to signal the allegiance which biology denies him. She's helping him because she knows what it's like, being an outsider, and because that's the role she's chosen for herself, to nurture, and bridge, and heal. The only one in her family that isn't frothing to fight.

And then the war party returns to the fortress of the Omatikayas. These days—partly because artillery, air forces, and Fourth Generation Warfare have rendered physical walls outdated; partly because Western countries are living through a period of remarkably peaceful homelands—these days, we think of the domestic and the militaristic as separate spheres. There is home life, tranquil and innocent; and there is the foreign front—some godforsaken desert overseas, where the blood runs like wine—and never the twain shall meet. This is a historical aberration. Pioneers placed their wagon trains in defensive circles, built their cabins without windows to withstand attack. The Sinaguan and Puebloan cliff dwellings of the American Southwest were

---

<sup>10</sup>/u/TheSalanian, Reddit.

built into sheer rock faces, and ground floors devoid of windows or doors—accessed only through retractable ladders which were raised at time of threat. “The house of every one is to him as his Castle and Fortress as well for defence against injury and violence, as for his repose.”<sup>11</sup>

The Sully family dismounts. “Fall in,” the father barks like a drill sergeant. Jake still hasn’t left his marine past behind him. That was his family before; this is his family now. He left one family behind for another, and now the mean old ex is knocking on his door, threatening the children. He’s a drill sergeant even to his sons, who call him “sir”; he carries automatic rifles to raids, and he cares for them compulsively at home. Now he’s reprimanding his sons: “You’re supposed to be spotters. You spot bogeys, and you call them in. From a distance! Jesus, I let you two geniuses fly a mission and you disobey direct orders.” Can you sound *more* like a drill sergeant? But he’s right. It wasn’t just for their safety, that they were up there, high above the action. It was to site exactly the kind of gunships that caught them off guard—a duty they absconded for love of metal and blood. The Na’vi corpse, sprawled out on a slab of concrete? The one Jake glanced at, passed over, in the search for his son? That’s blood on Lo’ak’s hands—and Neteyam’s too, because family ties obliged him to follow his brother, and in doing so, he defected on his tribe. There are books about the kinds of societies where they break this preference out of you—where children turn their parents in to the State, observe a higher loyalty. These novels are always dystopian, but maybe that’s because they’re written from our perspective—the perspective of the provinces, of a retrograde and tribal people—“primitives,” they’ll call us looking back, as we call our predecessors who thought themselves modern. But 2170 AD is not enough time, and blood still runs thicker than water, and Lo’ak gives his father and commanding officer a “Sorry, sir.” Jake tells Kiri to bounce, because her gentle, accepting femininity threatens and undermines the hard absoluteness of his authority, and also his nerve in exercising it. She just wants to tend to her brother’s wounds, because he’s family, and she cares.

Sully grounds Lo’ak—literally grounded, as in “can’t fly”—where the metaphor for childcare comes from. Then tells him to “get that crap off” his face. Lo’ak has painted himself up to look like a full-bore warrior—cosplaying, the same way Miles does. That insult will get passed forward, in a few moments, if you give it time.

This is cargocult: You put all your effort into getting the costume right, when the costume is secondary, and earning it comes first. The costume’s

---

<sup>11</sup>Sir Edward Coke, 1604.

just a token your community gives you, that says you've earned it. And Miles, who will never get the costume right, because of his biology, watches on in silence as Lo'ak's chewed out—tends to the banshees, fiddles with the leather of their harnesses. (Leather—splayed skin of the dead.)

Kiri helps Mo'at, the tribe's *Tsahik*—healer, matriarch, “grandmother”—tend to Neteyam's wounds; she sneaks a tonic into her step-brother's hand, to sip while she distracts Mo'at. Then she suggests yalna bark, instead, as ointment. “And who is *Tsahik*?” “You are, Grandmother,”—as Neteyam yelps—“but yalna bark is better. It stings less.” Kiri is gentle yet firm with what she thinks is right. This is a film about succession, about the new ways that rise to replace the old, and the tensions that arise between generations—the replaced, and replacement.

And now Neytiri lectures her husband, backlit by a beautiful blue lens flare, about all the stuff I just mentioned. How hard he is on them. How he's their father, not their sergeant. How they're a family, not a squad. He sighs, stops polishing his weapon, and gives her that moment of intimacy which makes it—somehow—all OK. “I thought we lost him”—in a whisper, eyes wet. Neytiri's eyes widen, her mouth drops ever so slightly; she puts her hand atop his. It's less melodramatic than I'm making it sound, but also—I want to call bullshit on this whole interaction. Not that it isn't realistic—it is; that's the problem. I'm nervous with absolutes, but aggression is always fed by fear. Even if the fear isn't felt, the entire reason, evolutionarily speaking, that an organism would be aggressive is, in the end, a form self-defense. “My life. My eggs. My children. My future.” We have some sayings, here on *'Rrta*, about mama bears. If an organism could reproduce and live in peace, it would, but it can't, so there's no use speculating. Flesh needs flesh, to stave off hunger. Flesh worries about lesser powers in its ecosystem one day becoming a threat—and kills them off preemptive. The humans, in this film, act out of fear when they incinerate the forest and butcher the megafauna and go after Na'vi. Fear of death in the short-term, or fear of death in the long-term—that greed for oxygen that drives them to hunt down tulkun. In other words, fear doesn't excuse you, because *everyone's* scared. Just because we sometimes forget that anger is a mask for fear doesn't mean it should move our hearts when the fear is revealed. The question is, what do you do with that fear. How much you prioritize your own security, or those of loved ones, over everyone else. Anxious mothers make petty tyrants because they lose sight of the big picture. It's not even that I agree with Neytiri—I've said it before, I'll said it again. A family *is* a squad of soldiers. A village *is* a fortress. War is upon them; peace is not

an option; failing to prepare your children for such a world is a dereliction of duty.

## Lab Rats

“There is a singular unifying reality underlying every biologic interaction on our planet. In immunology, that which does not kill you makes you different.”<sup>12</sup>

So Miles has drawn blue stripes all over himself to fit in. He and Lo’ak and Kiri trek through a tent structure with Norm and some scientists and are promptly kicked out. “Avatars only; go around.” More boundaries, more questions of belonging. Lo’ak apologizes, defensive and abashed, then promptly channels his shame into aggression, othering Spider in turn: “The blue stripes don’t make you any bigger bro.” It’s playful, but it stings. “Well I can still kick your ass,” Miles retorts. Like his father. Like both his fathers.

Inside the lab, we see Norm getting pulled from his avatar terminal. “Hell of a day,” the techie quips. That’s right—fire and brimstone. The kids bust through the side-door, their physical bodies moving slower than Norm can teleport.

The Na’vi and humans are adapted to different envelopes, different environments. The humans have to make bubbles for themselves Pandora, little atmospheres pumping different proportions of gases. Spider needs an oxygen tank if he steps outside, and the Na’vi need extra CO<sub>2</sub>.

But for now they’re maskless. “Yeah, ha-ha,” Miles mimes. “You know what really sucks? Is you can breathe earth air for hours, and I can only breathe your air for ten seconds.” That’s called foreshadowing. If they’re telling us, it’s cause we have to know. Kiri teases him, and they play animals together—like schoolkids, like lovers, hissing and snarling, feigning and dodging. (*Na’vi* are cat people, by the way, if it wasn’t obvious. They’ve got the tails, nose, ears, expressivity. There are some other influences and imports from the animal kingdom, but that’s the main one.) And if the “ten seconds” thing is set-up for future plot, it also establishes difference. There are things Miles can do, and things Kiri can do, and these things are different. The upside is that this allows for complementarity—a “stronger together” type emergence. The downside is that it makes co-living occasionally difficult, because needs and lifestyles differ. Jake and Neytiri have

---

<sup>12</sup>William B. Miller, Jr., evolutionary biologist.

seen both sides of this coin; they came out the other side saviours of their people.

The Sully kids fist-bump the techies—between that and all the “bro” this, “bro” that business, the Americanization comes on a little strong, but you can make the case that this is *exactly* intentional, that of course prolonged contact and cohabitation with between the Na’vi and Terrans would make a Pandora a little more like Earth.<sup>13</sup> And then Kiri straddles the glass tank that Grace Augustine’s body is preserved in, formaldehyde-style. What an unbelievably Christian name, Grace Augustine. “Hi Ma,” Kiri whispers, smiling, putting her hands against the glass, pressing her cheek close.

Is it a coincidence that her name is Grace, or that Kiri is her reincarnation? Grace in the Goldilocks zone. Grace, pity, generosity, charity—the way I understand these concepts are as ecological values, approximates to some unspeakable quality whose other manifestations include parsimony, economy, awareness, noticing, flow, hope, tao, appropriateness, the Goldilocks Zone, and Miller’s Law of Communication. They signify “the right thing” in that nebulous, impossible-to-articulate means of intuitive calculation, a hitting of mark that occurs only when one has ceased lying to himself, ceased fighting the flow and finally acknowledged it. Not the right thing for the short-term self, but the right thing for the system, which is also usually the

---

<sup>13</sup>We get a ton of contemporary American nuclear family metaphors structuring the Na’vi’s social relationships, making them palatable. Some are more explicit, some more subtle. The Sully family is ridiculously, almost parodically nuclear, in a way that tonally clashes with the anti-American, pro-indigenous messages of the film. There’s the Omaticaya’s visit to the Metkayina clan, like a visit to aunt and uncles, distant relations, hanging out with the cousins. We have Miles the exchange student. A sci-fi writer on Tumblr, pseudonym Dr. Silverfish, writes:

Kids whose bioluminescent freckles mirror the stars, bonding with four-eyed whales via interspecies linguistics; this is the good *Avatar: The Way of Water*. The transposition of US patriarchal family values, like flies in aspic, onto an alien world, in a narrative which is supposed to be a critique of colonialism; this is the bad *Avatar: The Way of Water...* The gender politics of the Sullies are subtle, but regressive; we see Jake teaching his son (not his daughters) to hunt, Neytiri (not Jake) preparing family food, Jake telling his eldest son to look out for his siblings, Jake comforting a grieving Neytiri (whose emotions are “wilder” than his). On Pandora, Cameron’s Eden, men are warrior leaders, women are spiritual leaders, everyone is heterosexual, and no one is disabled (indeed in *Avatar* 2009, Jake “escapes” from his wheelchair-bound disability into his new Na’vi avatar body). This is the eco-primitivist fantasy, which has always had troubling eco-fascist tendencies; ones that go unexamined here.

right thing for the long-term self. These are terms which try to take us out of our own inclinations towards smallness—pettiness, provincialism, selfishness, retribution, anxiety, hatred, othering... states which lead us down the path of bitter suffering. Not only because they lead to unnecessary and unproductive emotional anguish, but because they perpetuate sub-optimal solutions, are fundamentally wasteful, destroy and squander. To be so much less than you could be, to quote *Farscape*'s Crichton.<sup>14</sup> Grace, like its fellow approximation wisdom, is associated with greater perspective and spirituality, an understanding of relatedness (of oneness, of the genetic brotherhood of all life)—in direct opposition with myopia and a narcissism of small difference. They spotlight—hyperstitutionally—the shared interests—too often & easily forgotten—atop which all our political and epistemic conflicts play out. As virtues, they are typically learned or derived from experience, particularly the experience of suffering; when gained, they are accompanied by an expansion of consciousness. None of these descriptions are right, but in the space between them is something true, though it takes the right spirit to summon it.

There is a fine film by Terrence Malick, *The Tree of Life*, whose opening words are these:

The nuns taught us there are two ways through life, the way of Nature and the way of Grace. You have to choose which one you'll follow. Grace doesn't try to please itself. Accepts being slighted, forgotten, disliked. Accepts insults and injuries. Nature only wants to please itself. Get others to please it too. Likes to lord it over them. To have its own way. It finds reasons to be unhappy when all the world is shining around it. And love is smiling through all things.

That isn't quite right either, but there is something here—something important, in the opposition, some escape from the Hobbesian trap that Christianity caught a whiff of. You and I will not live to see that escape, but our descendants might. And the escape goes something like this:

The Universe is unfolding like a tree from seed. Ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny. Things start simple, multiply, and diversify. Atoms transmute at higher temperatures into ever more complex atoms. Minerals evolve, from simple hydrogen and helium into carbon, oxygen, silicon, nitrogen, and a thousand more. In the process, minerals invent life—lightning strikes amino acids, in the envelope of a clay pore—and life, in turn, goes on to invent

---

<sup>14</sup>Wormhole to *Farscape*.

a thousand more minerals. At every step, the Universe moves ineluctably towards complexity, born of ever more complicated bonds, arrangements, and organizations. Life begins unicellular; there are symbiotic mergers, to form complex cells; the complex cells coordinate, to form multicellular life; the multicellular life coordinates, to form ant colonies and institutions, like the Catholic Church—and all of this pointing to Gaia, to the Teilhardian noösphere, to planet-scale patterns.

In game theory, there is a strategy for playing games like an iterated Prisoner's Dilemma which is called "tit-for-tat." You begin the game co-operating. So long as the other players cooperate, you cooperate in turn. But if another player burns you, you burn them right back. This discovery gave rise to theories of *reciprocal altruism*—the idea that tit-for-tat cooperation between "selfish," evolved organisms can tenably emerge. Chimps take turns, grooming each other for parasites. Since there are parts of their own bodies their fingers can't reach and groom, both are better off for the arrangement. But if one of them freerides, the relationship breaks down.

What Robert Axelrod discovered was that tit-for-tat, strictly observed, leads to a death spiral. If one player makes a mistake—or for some reason is hard-pressed, and can't reciprocate—then the other player will burn him right back, and he'll burn them in turn, ad nauseam. In other words, blood feud. Hatfield–McCoy shit. And so what Axelrod pioneered instead is a strategy named "forgiving tit-for-tat." If you defect on me, I'll give you a second chance. And if you set up a simulation that is sufficiently life-like, then two paired-off players employing forgiving tit-for-tat strategies will win the highest earnings.

In *Tree of Life*, Malick pairs a Christian worldview with heavy naturalism—the birth of stars; lava cooling into land; algal mats—and it's weird, and it works, and I think this is why. There is an almost divine wholeness that the Universe is working toward, a Paradisal sync. And if all aggression is born of fear, fear of the Other, then forgiveness is essential to this unfolding. Jesus died on the cross to teach us a lesson. It doesn't solve the problem of limited resources and limited turf. It doesn't solve the conflict that arises from two, mutually exclusive desires. But it gets us closer to Heaven.

Lo, soul, seest thou not God's purpose from the first?  
 The earth be spann'd, connected by network  
 The oceans to be crossed, the distant brought near

The lands to be welded together<sup>15</sup>

## Lab Rats, part 2

Anyway, Kiri and Miles and Lo'ak are at the lab together. From Kiri's perspective—as Kiri, with Kiri, connected—we watch a recording of Grace on the holo-screen, making Lovelockian/Gaian<sup>16</sup> speculations about Pandora. All these messages from the past. Welcome to orientation. "Maybe I'm just losing it out here, but I'm seeing real evidence of a systemic response on a global level. I can't... I won't use the term 'intelligence,' maybe 'awareness' is a better word. It's like the entire biosphere of Pandora is aware and capable of cognitive response." The language, the webcam, evoke *Agnihilation*, which in turn shades *Heart of Darkness*, or Tarkovsky's *Stalker*. But here, envelopment and dissolution into nature—they're positive things, "connectivity," oneness. Post-acid ideology. And then Grace says she'll be "crucified" if she goes public with her theory. More Christian imagery; we're being hit with it hard. We watch Spider, watching Kiri, watching Grace: the logic of connection. And Lo'ak, ever the crass teenage boy, never saw a sacredness he didn't want to pop, asks who "knocked Grace up." More Americanisms.

This is one of the more persistent motifs of the film: the characters getting briefed, catching up on their history via video panel. Those who learn history? Get a chance to break the pattern. We saw it with the Colonel, en route to Pandora; we see it now with Grace; we'll see it soon with the Colonel all over again. And of course! This is a sequel. The meaning of "now" derives from the meaning of "then." Not just for the characters but for us, as audience members, ten years removed from the original *Avatar*. Cue overgrown ruins and wreckage, forest vines suffocating decades-old tech. A scuttled Star Destroyer—soundtracked by Streisand ("The Way We Were") and sunk in Ozymandian sand.

But I think these scenes are also about virtuality, about how the ability to encode information allows us to connect with others who inhabit distant realms of spacetime. And every second—every shot, every line of dialogue—in this film is in some way about connection. See e.g. what happens next: Lo'ak and Miles bro it up, teasing Kiri about her dad, the basic algebra—

---

<sup>15</sup>Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*.

<sup>16</sup>The Gaia Hypothesis: James Lovelock's theory, co-developed with Lynn Margulis, that says membraned Earth is its own sort of sentient, self-stabilizing system, all its organisms held together in a synergistic, self-regulating equilibrium.

bonding by choosing a common target. “I’m thinking their two avatars went out together in the woods...” More algebra in the fucking.<sup>17</sup> Lo’ak and Miles fist-bump. But now Kiri, fierce and wounded, hisses at Miles—“Hey!”—and you can tell it bothers her, and Miles, seeing it, eats his smile, looks at the ground abashed. The basic triangle—pairing up in twos. First Miles played outsider, the one with the air mask and the false stripes. He and Lo’ak went at each other, teasingly—I can still kick your ass, bro—and for a brief window, Kiri was on the outside. And then Miles and Kiri went at each other, play-snarling, and they were a twosome, and Lo’ak was out. Here Lo’ak and Miles gang up on Kiri, til Kiri and Miles share a look, and now it’s just Lo’ak on his own, playing defense.

Miles gets vulnerable, so Kiri’s less exposed: “Sometimes it’s not so great to know who your father is.” He’s talking about his own dad—spoiler, it’s Quaritch—but he could just as easily be talking about Lo’ak’s father. Because it’s not easy being Sully’s son, either. Son of the Toruk Makto. It’s like being a bench-warmer rookie on a championship team. Cameron scripted the Bronny James story years before it aired.

Cut to the recombinant Miles Sr., on a transport ship to Pandora. He’s wearing a gas mask, his little private atmosphere, so you know the ship’s filled with Earth-air.

## Orientation

Quaritch briefs his squad. “For our sins in our past life, we have been brought back in the form of the enemy.” It’s standard karmic cycle stuff: only by understanding other perspectives in the system of samsara can you escape it, can you cease perpetuating it. The only way to truly opt out of complicity in the cycle of death is renounce one’s right to life and silently starve. It’s not a coincidence that this is something approaching radical Buddhism. In the meantime, for us mere mortals, all we have is grace.

The marines’ mission is to hunt down and kill the Toruk Makto, Jake Sully. The crew is pumped; they bump fists, just like Miles and Lo’ak. You can read it either way: the brothers raised like American Marines; the marines raised like brothers. Bonding, over a shared enemy. The team’s headed for Bridgehead City, AKA Hells Gate 2.0, another threshold, another airlock, another foyer. Another Christian concept. The structure built by terminators in the ashes of the forest. The death of one ecology gives way

---

<sup>17</sup>Wormhole to AMNH, *Field of Mars* section.

to the birth of another. Bridgehead, after all, is military speak for a secure position behind enemy lines.

We see close-ups of Recomb Quaritch and his squad, their mask-assisted breaths forefronted in the audio mix, so they evoke Vader, but also parallel Miles, and Kiri, and emphasize the running “your atmosphere / my atmosphere” motif. Then a shot of Bridgehead City—a barren desert for miles radiating round its walls. An old joke—bomb everything to oblivion, set your ship down in the middle of the ruins, remark “What a shithole.” Played to the tune of Newman’s “Political Science.” Pollution spews into the bay, ash covers rock, and plumes of chem-smoke rise from vents and stacks. The re-combs disembark—step off their transport like the mechs. Their snake-like, queue-like, tethered connection to Pandoran air is no longer necessary—they can breathe freely now. “Masks off.” Fresh Pandoran air, the envelope their bodies are built for. It smells like home.

We’re re-introduced to Edie Falco’s General Ardmore, head of RDA’s Sec Ops—camo-clad and kickboxing a punching bag in her mech-suit. Last we saw her she was addressing any Na’vi and Earth monkeys still living at last round’s base. Via video message, natch—the nested screens are inescapable in this film, which makes sense, given it’s called *Avatar*. Have we talked about what that word means, in the Sanskrit Puranas? *Dreamwalkers*, the Na’vi call them. All of Cameron’s films come from dreams—the glinting chrome body, emerging from flames, that becomes *Terminator*. The bioluminescent forest, that became Pandora.

Ardmore’s message: “I’m addressing those who are illegally occupying the Hell’s Gate facility. Your crimes are acts of terrorism under Solar Unity law, and will be punished as such. Terrorism carries a mandatory sentence of death.” It’s always fun when military forces site “international” laws, as if anything about their operation were strictly legal. It’s mostly propaganda for the folks back home, i.e. the purported addresses? Are not the addressees. The same went down on the American West, six or eight or ten generations ago, when the U.S. gov pretended that that their pat little treaties were binding. Law only works within a community that has enough shared culture to agree to rules, let alone follow them. It’s a form of cooperation—and there is no ground for cooperation with a body that wants your extinction.

Brief sidebar to chat about decision rules. It’s a concept that might be familiar to lawyers or cyberneticists. Legal structures, and much of human coordination, uses definitions in order to determine a corresponding reaction—for instance, “manslaughter” versus “murder” entail different sentencing guidelines. Defining, or categorizing, a situation becomes a key

bottleneck, and its own battleground, as conflicts shift to linguistic warfare—e.g. pro-life and pro-choice camps fighting over what counts as a life, what counts as a human being. Politics itself becomes an enormous battle for definitions, and bureaucracy's greatest weapon is its ability to plausibly define a situation-at-hand. Is this a national emergency? Because if so, there are special budget allocations available. But first, you need to argue for the classification. Is this a state of war? Because if so, it'll need the approval of Congress. But Congress hasn't declared war since 1941, so clearly there's wiggle room. You see what I'm driving at. Accepting a definition is accepting a framework is accepting a course of action. So for the folks at home, the Na'vi are labeled terrorists, because that word warrants a violent extermination.

Ardmore and the Colonel shake hands; more precisely, her mechasuit (or “Skel Suit”) shakes hands with Quaritch’s recomb, while her actual hand mimes the motion of shaking in mid-air. She looks him-slash-us in the eye, his fresh face doubling for ours, as we take his perspective: “A lot’s changed since your last tour here. Walk with me.”

The base is one big construction zone—dirt and dust, gravel and sand, and rising from it, great metal structures painted the yellow of caution tape. Robotic crabs scurry, industrious, across the screen.

Every audience surrogate requires, by law, his fair share of overexposition, so: “We’re not here to run a mine, Colonel. As on-world commander, I’ve been charged with a greater mission.” She sips from her corporate coffee cup, as around her, an automated assembly line glows with the red of molten metal. *The same pattern, stamping, tiling itself across the universe.* Metal machine logic. “Earth is dying. Our task here is to tame this frontier. Nothing less than to make Pandora the new home for humanity.” Like a parasite, hunting for a new home, using rocket fuel to sneeze. “But before we do that, we need to pacify the hostiles.” She sips her coffee, smiles to herself. Manifest destiny, baby, with a whole new spin.

RDA started as a Silicon Valley startup that connected the world with high-speed rail. Then, when the resource wars broke out, they pivoted to algae farming, to feed humanity. The search for unobtainium, and for a livable planet, was always an existential mission. Offense, in service of defense.<sup>18</sup>

---

<sup>18</sup>Most violence is like this, an almost involution. The bar gets louder and louder; as others raise their voices to be heard, ours too must raise its voices, increasing others’ background noise in turn (so they must raise their voices again).

Earth is dying. Ten billion lives are at stake. It's one thing to fight for your country—but to fight for your species?

And what was it I said before, about fear being used as an excuse for aggression? “Why'd you do it, son?” “Well, I was scared.” “In that case...”

## Haunted by the Past

*Ayram alusing*: the Hallelujah Mountains. Site of the great—and final—battle of the last war. Hiding place of the Toruk Makto and his Omatikaya.

And the recombs? The recombs are here to test a hypothesis. Every time they send troops to the Hallelujah Mountains, searching for Sully's base, they take on heavy casualties. The RDA's presence in the *Ayram alusing* seems to trigger what Ardmore calls “an immune response” from the mountain banshees—a portentous phrase, echoing Augustine's Gaian language. But maybe—maybe, the hypothesis goes—the recombinant bodies of Quaritch's crew will be perceived as indigenous. Miles Sr. has the very stripes his son would kill for. “And how might we test that hypothesis, General?” “The hard way.” “Outstanding.”

Strong Heart. No Fear. I'd say Stupid, but Quaritch, bastard or no, is miles cleverer than Sully.

The recombs look around with awe and wonder from their Kestrels, as they soar through the floating, magnetized mesas. Maybe they've started to go native; maybe marines are capable of an aesthetic response.

Nearby but out of sight, the children of the Sully clan—plus Spider—dance and run along the great vines that serve as bridges between the mossy mesas. *Ayram alusing* is based on Wulingyuan, in China, if I had to guess—the great rocky outcroppings, rising from the mist, covered in greenery.

All the younger, newer entrants to this story—all the second-born—feel their outsider status, and strive to change it. Lo'ak's always trying to get involved in his dad's military operations; Miles is always trying to fit in. What's Tuk's strategy, youngest of the bunch? “You're not supposed to go to the battlefield. I'll tell mom if you don't let me come.”

This, as reported by Lo'ak, his voice bratty and high-pitched, mimicking Tuk. And why is Lo'ak ragging on Tuk? Because Miles accusingly asked why he brought her along. Offense born of defense. Tuk sticks her tongue out.

Vines hang, and ferns sprout, all about them, and there are fractal-shaped, fiddlehead or nautilus-type plants, spiral *helicoradians*. Pan up: the verdure is engulfing the wreck of a rotorwing, vines supporting its metal

frame like a canopy. “Are there any dead bodies up there?” Tuk asks, half scared, half blasé, as Kiri wanders off on her own, through violet pitcher plants, as flying reptiles—circular, spinning wings like a whirling dervish—float and parachute around her. I do think Cameron is a Malick enjoyer; the peaking of light through trees, the camera’s movement through undergrowth Kiri lies on her back all Whitman *Leaves of Grass*—making snow-angels in the blade-bed, like a raver in shag.

She closes her eyes. A slow ripple begins to emanate from the spot where she lies, and woodsprites—*atokirina'*, seeds of the Tree of Souls—falling, rest on skin. Her namesake: *atokirina'*, “Kiri” for short. Child of the Great Mother. Miles Jr. finds her in the clearing, unconscious, dead to the world—dissolving into Gaia—and he shakes her awake, desperate and terrified.

The recombs, too, have found the ruins. Nature reclaiming artifice, burying a Tower of Babel—in verdure, in sand, in water, whatever. The corporal swats at buzzing bloodsuckers. Quaritch-Reincarnate leans down, swipes at the overgrowth, reveals a single stenciled word on the metal beneath. “QUARITCH.”<sup>19</sup>

Above it, a blue wreath of stars. Quaritch straightens, peers over the metal and into the cockpit of the AMP exoskeleton, where a pilot had sat. A skull peers back at him, memento mori. Then he sees the arrows, sticking out the chest—examines their fletching, the yellow feathers. His Na’vi ears twitch and tighten back.

Palm fronds rustle; quiet footsteps. The Sully children watch through the overgrowth: Kiri whines how Dad will ground them for life, and Lo’ak just blows her off. She and Tuk are the outsiders here—too young, too girly, or both—which means Spider is in—“Bro, we have got to check this out”—and even if his heart’s trembling, he’d never say no.

They stoop as they sneak through brush, clutching their short bows—good for small game but not much else. The Colonel and the Corporal enter the link shack—a small trailer, really, with two link units, where human drivers controlled their avatars. This is where Jake and Norm controlled theirs, in the great war. This is where Quaritch came in his mechasuit, to kill them. It is a link between pilot and avatar, but also present and past.

---

<sup>19</sup>There are gaps in the san-serif, capitalized letters—vertical gaps in the “Q,” the “U,” the “R;” between the trunk and the cross of the “T.” The same stenciled typeface you find on military crates or construction zones. Those gaps are called bridges; the bridges create stability, prevent parts of the stencil—the center of an “O,” say—from breaking off.

—Which is now dawning on Lo'ak and Miles. “That’s where your dad, and my dad...” The stories—they’re real. Lo’ak calls it in: “Devil Dog, this is Eagle Eye, over.” “Eagle Eye, send your traffic.” That’s Jake—Devil Dog—on the back of a banshee, patrolling the airspace with Neytiri and Neteyam. Neteyam isn’t on the kids little time travel expedition because he’s old enough for grown-up duties, and that too is a boundary.

“I’ve got eyes on some guys. They look like avatars, but they’re in full camo and carrying ARs. There’s six of them. Over.” “What’s your pos? Over.” A gulp. “We’re at the Old Shack.” “Who’s we?” Another gulp. Miles didn’t want to call it in in the first place, thought they’d get in trouble. Which they will, but it’s beside the point. Lo’ak, hot head aside, sees the bigger picture.

“Me. Spider, Kiri... And Tuk.” Neytiri, who’s listening, gasps. That’s all her eggs, the whole brood sans one—in a single woven basket, and the nest is surrounded by cuckoos. And it brings back all the old fears—back when Jake was her whole world, in his own egg-shell of a link unit—soft skin and senseless, totally vulnerable.

Jake tells his son to pull back, very quietly—and to their credit, they do. Then Neteyam suggests a shortcut; Neytiri war-whoops; and their three banshees veer through a gap in the rocks. Little steps, like Kiri and her yalna bark.

The kids, fleeing toward home, bicker about how much trouble they’re going to be in, working through the old “I told you so routine.” Which is to say they’re still kids; the worst thing they can imagine is parental discipline. This is the moment their imagination expands—not by inches, but a whole paradigm shift—because the recombs leap out from the undergrowth, and shortbows don’t inspire confidence when you’re looking down the barrel of a 50-caliber assault rifle.<sup>20</sup>

“*Mawey*,” says Kiri to Tuk. Be calm. But she and Tuk are the only ones struggling. Lo’ak and Miles, on their knees, stand stock-still, chests out. Defiant. Proud.

There’s an odd look in Miles Sr.’s eyes as he looks at his son, who he does not know is his son. Something sad and sentimental, as his ears twitch. Then the fingers give the Sully kids away. “Hey Colonel, check it out. Four fingers. We got a half-breed.” Quaritch wants to see Lo’ak’s fingers too, and Lo’ak, at first feigning submission, turns his hands out to reveal, well, “the” finger.

---

<sup>20</sup>That’s the size caliber used in WWI anti-aircraft guns, or which the modern-day U.S. Coast Guard puts on helicopters to disable boats. AR-15s fire cartridges half that size. Ostensibly, it’s to handle Pandoran megafauna as well as Na’vi, who can stand over ten feet tall.

Two of them. Learned from his dad, of course. And Quaritch catches it too, smiles. “You’re his, aren’t you.” He likes this kind of defiance. Couldn’t stand to watch his prey roll over, pathetic. He lives for a real adversary, a proper fight. Even if it’s just the empty gestures of a strong heart.

He yanks Lo’ak up by the scruff, by the nape; if it weren’t so rough, it would be almost fatherly. “Where is he?” Lo’ak pulls the oldest of moves—feigning ignorance—with a twist at the end for flavor. For bravery. *Ke pltxänge oe ni’Inglisi—hu vonvä!*. I don’t speak English—to assholes.

But the Colonel, American or not, is no country fool, and he calls the bluff in broken, half-grammatical Na’vi. *Peseng ngeyä sempul?* Another yank at the braids; Lo’ak roars in pain, baring his fangs, still defiant. Time for next strategy: Move on to the women. Miles rears up, rabid, angry and pleading. “What’s your name kid?” asks Quaritch. Like he knows what’s coming. Because the body of this stranger, on a strange world? Looks a lot like *his* old body looked, so many years ago. Biology is the costume you’re stuck with; it gives you away every time.

Quaritch Jr answers. “Spider.” A pause. “Socorro.” The Corporal’s eyes angle toward his commanding officer, watching Sr.’s face. All of the Colonel’s men know what that name means. It is a word they haven’t heard in a long, long time. A lifetime ago. A name from another realm, another corporeal form. *Socorro*. So when Quaritch Sr. flicks his hand, the marine holding Quaritch Jr. knows exactly what to do. His hands let go of Spider, who stumbles forward. Facing his fate. His history becoming his future. The Colonel moves slowly, like you do when you’re trying not to startle an animal. He’s a different person suddenly—among hostile foreigners, he’s found family. His ten-foot, Na’vi form kneels down, to get on Spider’s level.

“Miles?” “Nobody calls me that.” “Well I’ll be damned. I figured they sent you back to Earth.” “You can’t put babies in cryo, dipshit.” Like father, like son.

“What’re we doing, boss?” His men’s eyes are on him, so the family reunion can wait. Quaritch radios in their position to Ardmore, waiting in a rotorwing—just like Lo’ak, moments earlier, called it in to Jake. There are maybe six things that happen in this film, but they happen over and over; every possible relationship, every gesture, is repeated and inverted and scrambled up, so that it’s explored in all its dimensions until you’re sick with it, sick with the structural analogies that keep piling up until the surface-level, Disney-safe good-and-evil plot topples over, and all you’re left with is blood and power.

Recomb Quaritch to Corporal Wainfleet: “Lyle, see if you can pull some data off that dash cam.” “Thing is deader than shit, Colonel.” “So are

we.” Call it foreshadowing, call it theme; call it resurrection, or reincarnation. The past is never dead, and we will soon be getting footage. Cue Sully’s avatar, addressing the AMP cam: “It’s all over.” Human Quaritch: “Nothing’s over while I’m breathing.” “I sorta hoped you’d say that,” Sully growls, then charges. Being a dad is about being a protector—we hear Sully say it about twelve times in this film. So who are you, Jake, without a monster to battle?

There are little dots all over the faces in the cam footage—a small homage to the motion capture tech which made this film possible. We don’t see Sully kill Quaritch, we just see Quaritch’s son, grimacing while he watches—as he watches his fathers battle to the death. It won’t be the last time.

The sun is setting behind the great gas giant, Polyphemus. The sky is slipping into darkness. A father protects. And now Sully gets his monster, his cyclops. Quaritch, in the body of a giant, has returned and he’s taking the kids, Captain Hook-style. A blue Robin Williams, Jake will have to do battle with his past in order to safeguard his children—his future. And isn’t that just a giant metaphor for parenthood, the whole schebang?

Sully, Neytiri, and their firstborn arrive on their dragons just as the sun slips away, and they are warriors in the trees, with bows and machine guns. Neteyam is tasked with staying behind, with watching the banshees.

It’s the Colonel’s first night in the forests of Pandora. The canopy crawls with unseen watchers. Shapes that grow teeth. Slinths with their venomous lances, and stalkings slingers with their darts, and scorpion-like arachnoids. Packs of viperwolves that move like liquid darkness. Fifteen-foot thanatators with armored backs and tails. Sully almost died, his first night. Neytiri saved him, and now they are together, in the trees, where the viperwolves once stalked him, and they are looking down on the recons like predators on prey.

Quaritch, in the gloom, watches his former body die at the hands of the very bow that Neytiri now notches from above. Hunter and hunted, switching off forever. Not even death can stop the cycle. There is a pained look on Quaritch’s face; his ears twitch, and Miles Jr., crouching, looking on, turns away confused. Lyle grabs the display screen before his CO tears up. Best not to dwell on these things. And the Colonel, lost in thought, picks up his old oxygen helmet—the same kind that Miles Jr. wears now, breathes through, depends on. Quaritch pulls his human skull out from the mask, holds it out, in his hand, at eye-level. *Alas, poor Yorick.* Neither human Quaritch nor recomb Quaritch need the mask anymore.

He looks at the skull—right dead in the eye sockets—and crushes it to dust in his fist.

## Kidnapping the Future

The recomb marines stand in the dark, in the rain, a swarm of insects buzzing round their heads, waiting for their air-evac. They've plunged to the heart of the jungle, and found gold. They are eager for extraction. But eclipse falls in the forest, and the beasts of Pandora are out.

Jake and Neytiri are utterly silent as they stalk through the coiling, glowing spirals of six-foot fiddleferns. The recombs are terrified, tense. We can hear the fauna crying out now through the bioluminescence, Kiri's ears swiveling. Does she recognize them? Understand them, even? Are they the mimic calls of her parents? Neytiri creeps behind a tree, lets out a woop, and even Miles picks it out now, though the recombs are clueless. There are some things biology can't give you.

Now Sully and Neytiri play "Short Range Guy, Long Range Guy," AKA "Guys Smash, Girls Shoot." Think Legolas and Gimli. Jake takes out a trooper—part of Quaritch's squad, Quaritch's family—with a hand ax. Neytiri, hidden behind a tree, aims a careful arrow at the marine holding Kiri and Miles. Kiri is praying to herself, incanting to Eywa: *Srung si ayoeru... Nawma Sa'nok, za'u.* A gun held tight to her head. Neytiri slackens the bowstring and turns away, paralyzed by worry and fear. Then she closes her eyes, and remembers they are not her children. So steeled, she turns back, draws the bowstring taut, and fires.

More recombs fall as the forest erupts with gunfire. They're nameless brutes, marginalized by the plot, the demands of narrative economy, by their role as villainous henchmen. By the end of this film we'll see a hundred more killed: civilian contractors, ships' crewmen—drowned, shot, gored to death—and no one will care. Their lives are meaningless. That's not my opinion, and I'm agnostic on whether it's right or wrong. It's a fact of the filmic world.

The Sully kids use their cat-fangs to rip into their captors, and Lo'ak pulls the pin from a smoke grenade. Then they roll off, handcuffed, into the underbrush. The Colonel crouches behind a log, next to the limp body of one of his men. The arrow which killed him is yellow-fletched, like the arrows in the chest of human Quaritch. Another worthy rival. Another chance at revenge. Another smile. "Is that you, Mrs Sully? I recognize your calling card." The survivors in his squad make hand signals, in the darkness; silently move into flanking positions, while Quaritch reloads his weapon. "Why don't you come on out? You and I, we've got some unfinished business."

"Demon!" she shrieks. "I will kill you as many times as I have to." The corporal goads her while his flunky sneaks around and flanks her. The goading's to distract her, and get her to reveal her position. "Got yourself a whole litter of half-breeds." We see her braided hair through the scope of a rifle, and a finger, squeezing the metal trigger—but then an arrow thuds in his back, yellow-fletched, Neytiri's calling card. Lo'ak: brave like Sully is brave, brave but stupid, so Jake has to pounce through the underbrush, pull his son under cover before he's mowed down by answering bullets.

The Sully children flee, and Quaritch Sr. fires his grenade launcher into the canopy after them. Spider tumbles through the brush and down the hillside, into the dale below, where the marines grab him. Kiri screams down after him, not wanting to leave him behind, but Neytiri just grabs her and goes.

This is where true colors show. When all the cheap talk about family becomes a costly fact. Which is that some people matter more than others—scandal at the heart of a liberal culture. On days like this, children are shocked into the realization, or have their long-nagging, unnameable suspicions confirmed. On days like this, parents learn who they are, and what they believe in.

Quaritch and his squadmates clip in to the evac ropes, dangling overhead from Ardmore's Dragonfly. Jr.'s slung over Sr.'s shoulder, bleeding from the fall. They're bathed in blinding white light, spotlights cast by airship above. The ropes retract and they're airborne, beamed up like an alien abduction, and the lights blink off, and the aircraft's gone. The Sullys watch them, from below, as they disappear from sight. If a recomb's killed, will they just keep bringing him back, eternally, from the old memory chips? Once the State owns you, will it ever let go?

The first thing Jake says to anyone in his family when he greets them, is "Are you hurt?" Just over and over again, all movie. His children go off, and something happens to them, and Jake's left with the wounded aftermath. I don't know what it means, I'm just reporting what I notice. Right after he asks if you're OK, and before you've had time to answer, he tells you you're OK. That you're going to be OK. And that everything will be. I think this equivocation defines his character, defines his fatherhood—he's never sure whether he's asking or telling, and he's no good at listening. In many ways he's a weak character, a weak hero. Insecure in his identity. Unable to lend sound counsel. Dragging his friends and family into old vendettas. And the equivocation—it's like his fate is halfway in his hands, the way all our fates are halfway in our hands. Sometimes we tell the world what to do.

Sometimes the world tells us. “Are you OK?” “You’re OK.” “Everything’s gonna be OK.” By the end of this story, it won’t be.

## **Part II**

## Theater (Interlude)

In front of the screen, a black shadow—as a man stands up in the IMAX<sup>21</sup> theater, heading for the restrooms, and the whole aisle shifting in our seats to let him pass. It's the imposition of one upon dozens that leads to bladder-holding, and latent regret at not sitting aisle, or at drinking that soda. A man stands up; you judge him harshly, annoyed at his blocking your spectacle of lights, disrupting your immersion into worlds, knocking over your popcorn. And then that familiar tightness, the same urge overtaking you: Now you are the man blocking the spectacle, disrupting immersion, spilling out popcorn. A victim-perp swap that builds character, shows you both sides of the equation. Breaks you out of your delusions of innocence, forces you to accept complicity in the ongoing interpersonal warfare we call “society.”

Or reverse the equation: travel the gamut from guilt-stricken to *no big deal*. Having been there, felt that, now. Feel your heart, going out, for the man shuffling down the aisle—that you'd give so much more to accommodate him in his need.

There is even a silver lining. The interdependence of theater-goers: an ecological huddle. The way everyone's crammed together to save Midtown Manhattan real estate means that my leaning back is your restricted legroom, that my shuffling by will spill your cup of water. So we all shuffle into positions and try to stay there, try to sit still, to adjust as little as possible. But the man who shuffles down the aisle towards the bathroom frees us from our present gridlock—disrupted, we are free to try some new configuration.

In the reshuffling, some get into better configurations, others worse. Even if there's a trend towards better positions—shuffling until comfortable, then stopping shuffling—the treadmill of muscle discomfort and ache means that there's no final resting point; every comfortable position becomes uncomfortable eventually. In wake of disruption, people re-anneal their own orientations to the new world. This is why chaos—true unpredictability—is worse than many oppressive regimes. The rapid, irregular disruptions pre-

---

<sup>21</sup>This text is based on the original IMAX release, with some reference to alternate cuts. Thirty-two versions of the original Avatar were made for different theatrical and home releases—for different aspect ratios, sound systems, 2- vs 3D, IMAX and regular. There is no authoritative version. This messiness is more typical of art than the cellophane-illusions of the 20th C. And the mess accumulates, the cellophane is undone, as digitization eats the world: Kanye and Playboi Carti tracks leak at various stages of production and overhaul; fans collate different versions and cuts to form their own album-interpretations, their own personal visions of the artist.

clude individuals' optimization towards a workable set point, so the suffering is perpetual, wound after wound that never scars, never heals.

Me, I'm optimizing over the set of my body parts, trying to balance pains and pleasures, work and rest, between muscles. The buttocks ache so relieve pressure by countering with pressure from the hands and arms and legs. The arms begin to ache so move the weight back to the buttocks.

I'm typing this text, a year later: but when I handwrote the notes, somewhen between, Anteros's head lay on my lap, and little Ripple perched on my thighs, both sound asleep; and I do not dare disrupt them. Minutes pass; the way of water calls; I must.

## Family is Our Fortress

Miles is a white kid with blonde dreadlocks, which is funny. He starts slamming a chair against the two-way mirror. One of the marines behind the two-way mirror tells coffee-sipping Quaritch: "He's completely feral; thinks he's one of them." Which is also funny—a callback to Quaritch going totally apeshit in the recomb lab, and also to the whole "We napalmed your planet / What a shithole" perspective-flip mentioned earlier. You cause certain conditions in others, see yourself in the reflection, and blame it on them. "They're just savage people! Nothing to do with kidnapping and locking them in a cage!" Quaritch doesn't quite buy it either, but he stays quiet. In the dark, the white freckles on his Na'vi body light up like constellations. When his blank face breaks into a subtle expression, it's not one of gleeful, mocking superiority, or a resigned "objective" analysis, but an expression of pain.

Cut scenes and the inter-generational surveillance is flipped: now we see the Sully kids spying on their parents, peering through a crack into the tent home. Jake: "He's hunting us. He's targeting our family. He had them under his *knife*." Remember that phrase, under the knife. Neytiri doesn't want to leave: this is her home, this is her people, she and him are sworn to protect them. She lifts a bow from its display stand. It's the bow that killed Quaritch the first time around. "My father gave me this bow as he lay dying; he said protect the people." One hand defends, the other destroys. It's the same motion. One arm holds the bow, the other notches the arrow.

Jake counters that leaving *is* protecting them, that their presence puts the tribe at risk. This seems like a sane argument, but one the movie also appears to reject. All this? Will only end when he stands his ground. "Wherever we go, this family is our fortress."

The corresponding soundtrack motif is titled “Family Is Our Fortress,” so the film’s probably trying to tell us something. Let’s get this out of the way because it’s crucial: Show me a family, I’ll show you a war party. A cry of pain, a cry of victimization, is a war cry. A claim of injustice is an incitement to violence. To be under assault recommends forceful response in turn, but when does a defensive maneuver become an offensive ploy? The existence of an inside demands the simultaneous rejection and control over the constructed outside. One hand protects, the other hand kills. If someone tells you you’ve messed with La Familia, you better fall to your knees and apologize, start running, or put your fists up—but it won’t much matter either way. The worst triangulation is between you, a cub, and its mama. That’s what Cameron’s *Aliens* was all about. Ripley tip-toeing through the matriarch’s lair; all the mummifying bodies being used for egg-laying. “Sigourney” is French for “conqueror.”

Another running theme in this film is that Neytiri defers to Jake, Jake makes the wrong call (as evidenced by his plan, which is really a non-plan, falling apart and costing lives). And then Neytiri’s preferences are revealed—by plot-magic, natch—to have been sound. The roles in the first film, where Neytiri shows Sully around and initiates him into the world, has been reversed. Sully makes the calls, and Neytiri follows (albeit only semi-meekly). What’s stayed the same is that Sully still can’t catch a clue. So maybe family isn’t a fortress after all. If there’s any narrative justice for Neytiri, future films will see her taking charge—of her people, her planet, her path.

## Kid, You Got Heart

Right after the whole “family is our fortress” scene, we see the ideology in action. We’re up close on Miles’s frantic, panicked eyes—some sort of plastic faceguard strapped on—as Ardmore interrogates him and he makes his mind a walled palace, resisting. They have this mind-reading tech where scientists in white labcoats examine a glowing 3D hologram of his brain, and mumble something about his prefrontal cortex. It’s all very *Farscape*. Which is to say to campy. And Falco, as Ardmore, is just terrible in this film, or terribly cast, or terribly written. Without a doubt the worst performance, and there are several bad ones. Does Cameron understand the concept of a general? Things are different on the frontier, granted, but four-star generals typically don’t fly deep into enemy airspace to facilitate dangerous troop extractions. They don’t normally stroll around with a cup of coffee barking

orders at grunts. That sorta stuff is several levels of hierarchy below her. At the very least, there should be a large operations staff following her around at all times, messengers of her will. This woman is supposedly the world-commander of an entire planetary operation that's been termed Earth's last hope: in charge of building cities, conquering natives, and coordinating with trillion-dollar corporate projects. This woman is in charge of enough gunships, weaponry, and military capital to usher in armageddon. And here she is single-handedly interrogating a thirteen year old. Because there's no one better qualified and she's got nothing better to do. Anyway.

"Where's Jake Sully?" Ardmore demands. Some random recomb wanders around the interrogation room, peering at the hologram, because why not? This wasn't a serious operation anyway. Miles Jr.'s still naked; no one bothered to dress him before they put him in a chair. Maybe these are Guantanamo techniques. It's funny how walking around in a Speedo seems totally naturally when they're in the jungle, like Tarzan, but put him among other fully dressed humans and it's weird.

All Miles has to do is imagine the location of the Sully base. Doesn't even have to say it out loud. It's so easy; he has every excuse. The most understandable thing in the world, to let your mind slip. Instead he's pulling mental jiu-jitsu, putting up stone walls, practicing every Zen technique in the book, just to keep from thinking of a pink elephant. Have you ever played The Game? The goal is not to think about The Game. There's a whole psychological subfield dedicated to these problems, called ironic process theory. The harder you try not to think of X, the surer it is that you will think of X. As usual, a novelist (Dostoevsky) noticed it (published it) first. Spider is bleeding from his nostrils, trembles epileptic.

Miles Sr.? Paces and flinches. His son in pain. His son? The son of the body that his mind has been copied from. A blood vessel on his temple pulses. Can't stand it any longer, slams the big Staples Easy-Button switch to shut the telepathy machine off. This stuff is just so goofy, you can't make it up. The worst scene in the movie, and there are plenty of questionable ones. No concept of rank, no concept of hierarchy—it's like the U.S. Marine Corp is just a buncha dudes hanging out, shooting the shit, deciding what to do. I know they're not actually American Marines anymore—they're technically "SecOps" for "RDA," i.e. an American paramilitary contractor. But same difference. A common Hollywood portrayal of soldiering, but does that really excuse it?

"Let me try a personal angle," Quaritch suggests. General Ardmore, mostly unperturbed by this blatant and public insubordination, reminds him that Jr. isn't his son. They're like an old married couple, bickering over

stepkids. Why does the film, and its characters, seem to take for granted that “son” is a purely biological concept? Is I guess my question. Because Spider has zero biological relationship to the Sullys either, and he’d die before selling them out. “Our family is our fortress.” The whole scene bugs me. It’s touching that Jr. gets to be tough, gets to show a level of loyalty that Neytiri—to name one conspicuous example—does not reciprocate. And it’s touching that Sr. gets to watch, frustrated and admiring at once. And that their shared sense of loyalty, of duty, will bring them together. All that, I’m on-board with. It’s just the execution that’s so clumsy, these caricatures of the military, so flimsy.

Anyway, Spider proves that family is Jake’s fortress by suffering on his behalf—a running motif that’s just getting started. Quaritch, the inveterate soldier-jock, gets to make his little anti-labcoat jab, about how those “science pukes” leaned on him hard but Jr gave ‘em nothing. “I respect that.” (Nothing like bashing on a shared adversary to bring two people together. And you just know that Quaritch relished giving swirlies to geeks, back in high school.) Spider, back in a holding cell, breathes its Earth-air freely. Quaritch, joining him—bends down, to get on his level—can’t help but hit the CO<sub>2</sub> mask. Which is a nice detail. Quaritch is here on his own ship, his own turf, but its atmosphere is alien. Whereas Spider’s as far from home as he’s ever been, yet this air, he can breathe it perfectly. Sr.’s got a Pandoran body, fighting for Earth, and Jr.’s got an Earth body, fighting for Pandora. And each of them breathes freely, only on foreign soil.

Spider’s under a table, like a cat, and when he runs for it, Quaritch grabs him, calls him “tiger.” Jr.’s feisty, but Sr.’s just plain bigger than him. Quaritch pacifies him, then kneels. Not condescending, but like a peer. “Kid,” he says. “You got heart.” He tries to give Spider his dad’s old dog tags, but Jr. just throws them across the room, disgusted. And Sr. gives a good speech, that almost makes you like him. “That’s Colonel Miles Quaritch. Deceased. Killed in action. I’m not that man. But I do have his memories.” You almost feel a pang of sympathy, if you’re so predisposed, for this big blue body, that was grown in a lab by small pink monkeys who breathe a different atmosphere. That got implanted with the memories of a dead pink monkey. And the old affections, inclinations, impulses? Some of those came too. There are stories of heart transplants, that work like this. Some guy gets a heart transplant, his whole life he’s never liked anything except country, and suddenly he’s blasting Beethoven, Bach, Verdi, tuning in to the local classical station, his wife barely recognizes him. Or a fast-food loyalist gets a heart from a vegan donor, suddenly she can’t touch meat, it makes them nauseous. Or a little kid who loved swimming, and gets a heart

from a drowning victim, is now terrified by water. None of these people knew how their donors passed, none of them knew their donors' lifestyle or preferences, but the body remembers. The ghostly trace of another organism lives on, inside you, and it changes you, and you become a kind of hybrid—part me, part... them.

And it gets eerier when you remember that this is Jake Sully, too. Quaritch's brother-in-war. He, too, is a set of memories, desires, beliefs, implanted in a lab-grown body. Someone else's program, running on his hardware. And the horrifying part—horrifying if you're Sully or Quaritch—is how there is no original you. The transplant recipients? They had a heart. A beating, feeling, remembering heart. And something happened; it clogged and convulsed and destroyed itself. Was choked and strangled of oxygen. And someone else's heart—like the lone survivor of a shipwreck—was salvaged and put in its place.

But Recomb Quaritch? These ghostly traces are the only self he's got. The monkeys woke him up, on a gurney, and they tasked him with a mission—and even though it wasn't his mission, it was theirs, he had no other mission to believe in, no other mission to follow.

Sr.: "I do have his memories. Enough to know that, well, he wasn't always the best father. That's not an apology—I'm not your father. Technically? You and I? We're nothing to each other. But I can help you. I can get you out of here."

This interaction sets up half of our plot. One half will be Jake and his bio-kids: on the run, starting a new life, struggling to fit in as outsiders. And the other half will be Jr. and Sr., chasing them down. We're rearranging the lines, the boundaries, the divisions of inside and outside, the borders of family and biology and culture, so that lines which were already blurred become blurrier, and seemingly simple loyalties are complicated. And our loyalties, as an audience? Will get complicated with them. Quaritch offers to take Miles Jr. along on the mission—save him from the science pukes. "I'm not gonna ask you to betray Jake Sully. I know you'd never do that; you're loyal. I admire loyalty. Just ride along. But otherwise I gotta give you back to the lab coats." I help you, you help me—just the kind of reciprocity and mutual dependence that builds bonds of alliance, so stay tuned.

But it also goes both ways: Jr. isn't just indebted to Sr.; Sr. becomes indebted to Jr. The more time they spend together, the messier things get. The more connected Spider becomes to the Colonel, the less he's a Sully. The more connected the Colonel becomes to Pandora, the less he's a Colonel, the more he's plain old Miles. RDA's pseudo-Terran atmosphere don't suit him no more. Whether he likes it or not, this is his new home.

That's what the banshee-taming scene's about, at least partially. Quaritch and his crew going native. But we're not there yet. We're headed to the coast. The Sullys, too, are exiles.

## A Coastal Welcome

There is a peaceful transition of power under the Tree of Souls. A young man named Tsarem is taking Sully's place. "The leader must die, so the leader can be born." There is a ceremonial killing—Frazer-indebted—where Tsarem takes a knife to the Toruk Makto's chest and draws a line of blood. Succession is the hard problem, but it's easier when the old king no longer wants the job.

Then the Makto and his family are airborne on their banshees, looking backward with regret at their old forest home, as they fly for oceans on which the children have never set eyes. Great seas of instability, and shifting tides await them. Sully Sr. sets his jaw, stares forward, determined. "A father protects. It's what gives him meaning. One life ends, another begins." They cross through dramatic sea-storms, waves crashing upon great rocks—fly through lightning and wind and rain, finally arriving at shallow turquoise waters. The soundtrack shifts and lightens—nearly sparkles with relief. A new music, a new chord. "The sea clans are a world unto themselves. Thousands of islands, unknown territory into which we can vanish without a trace." Tuk, waking from her nap: "Are we there yet?"—another nod for the families in the audience, and then we see it—the outer boundary. A seawall or breakwater formed by a long line of travertine terraces, geothermally heated, cascading limestone pools that ring and protect the bay. Not much different than a cell membrane—a way of limiting the effects of outer, tidal forces; a way of incubating life. There is whooping and hollering as the banshees approach the great mangrove-style roots<sup>22</sup> of the Metkayina village, *Awa'atlu*. Conch trumpets herald their arrival.

From above, we see the tribe's *marui* pods, similar to the tent-like homes of the Omatikaya Clan; and the dolphin-like *Ilus*, and the skimwings (*tsurak*) like an amphibious banshee. Hybrids: nostrils for surface air; gills for breathing underwater. Adapted to two atmospheres, two environments. The Sully children are not yet adjusted to the sea, lack the bio-adaptations of the Metkayina,<sup>23</sup> which will become a plot point but also adds another star

---

<sup>22</sup>St. Petersburg wormhole.

<sup>23</sup>Not so crazy a plot-point, although for political reasons, human genetic variation is often downplayed, so that it seems shocking to imagine differing anatomies within a species.

to the whole insider/outsider, adapted/maladapted, your-atmosphere/ my-atmosphere constellation.

The banshees make aerial passes, like fighter jets awaiting clearance to land, and finally settle on a strip of empty beach. They dismount, Tuk helped down by her mother. Then Neytiri goes for her bow, but Sully tells her “leave it.” Which seems savvy, but why is he taking charge of this diplomacy? It’s true he’s Toruk Makto, but these are her people. Ostensibly the Omatikaya clan has some history with the Metkayina, which she is privy to and can speak for.

A ring of spear-wielding, turquoise-colored Na’vi surround them: less friendly now, menacing and glaring even though they outnumber the unarmed Sully clan fifteen to one. It summons to mind Jake’s introduction to the Omatikaya, in the first film: The same war-whoops, the same menacing crowd, the same full-body inspection of otherness. The same call-and-response between husband and wife, *olo’eyktan* and *tsahìk*: “His alien smell fills my nose.” Neytiri saved Jake’s ass then, and she’ll save it again, today.

The teen royalty of the island do a roundabout inspection, snotty and proud, eyebrows bent with performed hostility. It’s all a bit juvenile. The Metkayina have large, flat, paddle-like tails for swimming, and the local princes mock the forest dwellers, even as Neteyam and Lo’ak make gestures of respect and submission. Even the Na’vi are xenophobes, I guess is the takeaway here. But just as we get the division, the intra-sex, inter-male conflict—just as we get our first whiffs of male-on-male rivalry, we also get the promise of an inter-sex bridge. A Metkayina princess emerges from the sea like Botticelli’s Venus, pearls of water dripping down her hair, flashing eyes at the Sully boys before she dives, coquettish, back into the water. Both the boys are enchanted—playing out their father’s arc, all over again—this time transposed onto a different set of other-relations.

As the princess steps from the sea, and onto the shore, she brushes the hair off her forehead and behind an ear; we see the enlarged, fin-like wrists—an adaptation for swimming, called “strakes.” She chastizes her brother and his friend—slaps at their hands and puts them in their place while saying their names for us: Aonung, Rotxo. Then turns and addresses the newcomers—princes in their own right, now exiled, stripped of their rank by their father’s decision. “Hey,” Lo’ak ventures, flirtatiously nodding and smiling—and she smiles back—a broad smile, pearly whites and big

---

But the Bajau “Sea Nomads” of Southeast Asia have enlarged spleens, providing them a greater than average reservoir of oxygenated blood cells, and may carry the mammalian dive reflex (present in all humans, at infancy) well into adulthood.

blue eyes showing—before looking down, as if embarrassed. Then the music changes, becomes tense again; two enormous, flamboyantly red skimwings descend: the clan leader and his tsahìk, instantly recognizable for their size and stature, their proud posture; for the ornament of their clothing, and the size of their mounts. I get that you have to keep the cast of a film small; I found it hard to track all the names and relationships on first watch as-is. But there's also something suspicious about how we only ever meet Na'vi royalty in these films. The rest are just proverbial extras—no dialogue, no names, no roles in the action. It's court drama. Perhaps it's jarring because it inverts the structural sympathies of the film: the humans, in the first movie, were represented by working-class grunts, technicians, lab coats. Our hero was a paraplegic who lived in a cinderblock studio apartment, which is a polite way of saying there wasn't enough space for a separate bathroom or kitchen. (Even rodents, in their burrows, have different rooms for eating and shitting.) Our Na'vi royals, meanwhile, are the most beautiful, courageous, wise members of their whole clan—not just the best warriors and best decision-makers, but the best healers and the best banshee riders and the best looking (etcetera). This isn't an uncommon way to run a cast of characters—Tolkien jumps to mind, with his great lines of Numenorean men, who stand taller and live longer than the rest, these impeccable specimens of wisdom and warfare, with healing hands and modest dispositions. But Tolkien is a representative of a medieval, Biblical, and feudal—i.e. deeply and self-consciously patriarchal—worldview. Whereas Cameron is ostensibly trying to channel the opposite ideology. At least the likes of Aragorn or Faramir were balanced out by unassuming hobbits, heroes small in stature and reputation—or the corruption of a (royal) Boromir and Denethor.

Speaking of story, back to the narrative: Tonowari, chief of the Metkayina (i.e. “reef people”) emerges and exchanges greetings with Sully and Neytiri. He has beautiful, Pacific-island style tribal tattoos all over his face and breast and shoulders, as many of the Metkayina do. Now we get the Galadriel-style tsahìk, Ronal.<sup>24</sup> She is more reserved, less welcoming. Her face gives nothing away; she stays empowered, reserving the right to decide. She oozes power and authority and self-assurance; her husband, the ostensible clan-leader, seems like mere figurehead next to her, with his peacocking red-and-purple feather-shawl. Tonowari will do the perfunctory, boilerplate talking; Ronal will swoop in and get to the heart of it. Why do you come here, he asks. To seek *Uturu*, says Jake, and it's delivered with a gravity that gives the word a sacred, religious tone. *Uturu?* Ronal asks, and

---

<sup>24</sup> Played by Kate Winslet, star of Cameron's *Titanic*.

now her face flashes wish emotion. Her ears flatten, and her brow crinkles, somewhere between disbelief and offense. This gives Jake the opportunity to explain uturu for the audience. “Asylum for my family,” he adds. She blinks, turns toward her husband, twitches her ears.

Tonowari says, more or less, that family will be dead weight. “You are forest people. We are reef people.” This gets emphasized so that later, when the Sullys become part of the clan, part of the Metkayina family, we’ll get the message that really, underneath those apparent differences, they were both people. By which I mean Na’vi, but this underscores another point. That “personhood” isn’t so much about whether you’re a member of the species *Homo sapien* so much as it is about whether you’re recognized as a full-blooded agent—someone who is ends, rather than means; someone with inviolable natural rights; someone who can be reasoned and bargained with; someone who can make accords and enter contracts and be coordinated with. Most children aren’t even people in this full sense, which is part of why family dynamics are so fucked up. We start out like pets and we end up as people. Along the slow gradient transition, parents are forced to keep up, to shift how they relate to and coordinate with their brood-brats. (Sometimes, they just keep treating us like pets.)

We can adapt, Jake insists, even as Ronal inspects their bodies—the thinness of their arms, the weakness of their tails. “These children are not even true Na’vi!” she pronounces, and the audience gasps. “They have demon blood!” Ronal holds up the five-fingered hand of shame-faced Lo’ak. It’s easy to be hard on Ronal in this scene, to read her with a modern progressive lens, with accusations of body-shaming or racism or fantasies of blood purity. But I don’t think Ronal has anything against the Sullys, not really. What she cares about is protecting *her* clan. One hand defends, the other destroys. These are people under threat of extinction, under threat of extermination. They neither know nor understand the Skypeople—only that the Skypeople pose an existential threat, and that Jake was once one of them. They neither know nor understand the avatar program and its technologies; or the strange transubstantiation by which a mind-controlled tool of the RDA became a full, flesh-and-blood agent. They do not know what war and strife the Sullys bring with them, but they are right to suspect. War will be upon them soon, and this demon half-breed will have led them here. This says nothing about the “inherent” or “essential” qualities of hybrids, or any race they partake in. It’s about history. Jake is connected to the Skypeople. There was a bond that was never, and is never, fully severed. Their shared history binds Jake to the Skypeople, and the Skypeople to Jake—whether he likes it or not, whether he wishes it or not. And trouble leaps across

such connections, which are agnostic to their use as medium of creation, or medium of destruction.

Jake again protests weakly, unconvincingly, that the family will adapt. Which is what this film's about, adaptation.<sup>25</sup> But when you change, you don't just gain something new; you give up part of yourself in the bargain. It's like heart surgery. "I was born of the Skypeople, and now I am Na'vi. You can adapt. We will adapt, OK?" Any strength in his speech, sapped by that last "OK"—that asking search—for affirmation, support. The weakest of oppositions to his presence has been levied—the stronger argument, about risking war and the wrath of the Skypeople, is still forthcoming—and yet Jake has no real retort, no rebuttal. They've been flying—ostensibly for days or weeks—to reach these islands, and he has no plans, no prepared speech, no bargaining chip. He is unable to make a single case for why the Metkayina should take him and his family in, not a single reason why it's their problem, or in their interest. And that selfish argument is crucial. It's called tit-for-tat, i.e. you tit, and I tat. Organisms—social superorganisms, or just plain people—who risk their neck for strangers, without any hope of reciprocity or advantage, they don't last very long. Most of the patterned energies we call "life" are pretty good at sticking around, otherwise they wouldn't be around, ergo...

But now Neytiri snatches victory from the jaws of defeat, finally switches from passive to active role. Her face shines; her voice drips with power. The way she pronounces the words in an ominous half-whisper, the way she holds her head, the way she meets Ronal's eyes and doesn't let go. "My husband was Toruk Makto. He led the clans to victory against the Sky People." She invokes a debt, while flipping their status from beggars to boons. But then Ronal gives the obvious retort—what is so great a warrior doing running, hiding, seeking asylum? Why is a victor in need of protection? Neytiri looks down, ashamed, tables turned again. What will it take to bring her back into action? An attack on her family. "It seems Eywa has turned her back on you, chosen one" Ronal tells Jake, although she's looking at Neytiri as she says it. A taunt. A provocation. "Chosen one"—dripping with irony.

---

<sup>25</sup> Marco Milella, Italian anthropologist at Çatalhöyük: "You cannot stop this ability of our species to change. It is like trying to stop a river." Ian Hodder, British archeologist at Çatalhöyük: "[As a species] we're manically concerned with temporality and change." One narrative of human evolutionary history traces our dominance to the following feedback loop: Humans, being highly adaptive generalists—see e.g. our prolonged childhoods, for greater cultural and environmental learning—humans, being highly adaptive generalists, outcompete rival organisms in highly disrupted environments. Then they go on to alter their environments through tools and niche construction, increasing their advantage.

Not a religious zealot, Ronal. A pragmatist, who understands the power of prophecy. Neytiri hisses, bares her teeth and pins her ears. Ronal responds in turn. Like two cats. The husbands look around, concerned and uncertain. Jake jumps in, all “I apologize for my mate; she’s flown a long way and is exhausted” (another audience nod) and Neytiri immediately, rightfully interjects: “Do not apologize for me.” Sully Sr is so out of his depth, as both an outsider to the Na’vi, and an outsider to the affairs of women. He tries to give her a look, like “down dog,” and her voice is angry and betrayed. “Jake,” she says, hurt and disbelieving, and turns away. Jake’s a fucking idiot basically all the time. Every decision he makes is the wrong one. He’s weak, and he’s spineless, and other people die for it. The problem isn’t that he runs—the problem is how he runs, the half-assed way he puts entire clans at risk on a whim, with neither plan nor second thought. He’s arrogant, and guileless, and he lacks caution.

All of this is so deeply uncomfortable—the Toruk Makto’s self-effacing subservience; the Sullys’ infighting and their lack of united front in their hardest moment—that Tonowari is moved to step in and save face for them.

In the real world—or at least, here on Earth—the Sullys would have been publicly honored, welcomed inside the clan leader’s home, and then grilled for details vis-a-vis their intentions. Leadership 101 goes: Don’t have a power struggle in front of the troops. Creates uncertainty, division, and doubt. But we’re either on Planet Hollywood or Planet Pandora, and if you’re feeling generous, you can say that the Na’vi? They value transparency.

“Toruk Makto is a great war leader,” Tonowari tells the tribe. “All Na’vi people know his story. But we Metkayina? Are not at war.” He’s providing an opening, for Jake now, to make a public commitment of his own. Tonowari may just be figurehead, but he’s good at it. Sully: “I’m done with war, OK? I just want to keep my family safe.” Not exactly the high-flung diction you’re hoping for, and Jake uses Tuk as a prop as he says it, clutches her in his arms, beleaguered. The lines aren’t even delivered for the public, for the crowd—Jake failing to understand the game he’s playing, which is a public negotiation with the whole tribe. Instead, the Toruk Makto’s voice breaks into a soft pleading whimper, poorly acted—either deliberately, as a diegetic aspect of the narrative, or because Sam Worthington has limited range and “showing vulnerability” lies outside it. He lowers his eyes as he says it, slightly stuttering. It’s like watching a traumatized animal, so pathetic you start feeling bad.

But Ronal and Tonowari understand wanting to keep family safe. That’s what all this is about for them, anyways. If they didn’t interrogate strangers

at their doorstep, they wouldn't be good leaders, and they might not have a tribe anymore. "*Uturu* has been asked," Neytiri reaffirms—announces publicly, loudly, playing her last card at this decisive moment of negotiations. That card is ritual—religion, custom, and only she can properly play it, because only she is properly Na'vi. It's not about blood, or how many fingers she has, or whether her body was grown in a lab. It's about history; it's about the fact that her clan has upheld the rite of *uturu* for untold generations, has sheltered fellow asylum seekers under its premise. That's what gives her the right to request it now. That's what obliges the Metkayina to answer. Tonowari turns to his wife and gives her an asking look. She, of course, knows what's coming—so she hesitates to meet his gaze, reluctant. They're much more functional, this couple, than Jake and Neytiri. Their gazes meet, and he gives a little shrug, of both his eyebrows and his shoulders. And she sees him, and closes her eyes, and bows her head, and the matter is settled. Quietly, and forever. They turn to the tribe, united by decision. "Toruk Makto and his family will stay with us. Treat them as our brothers and sisters. They do not know the sea, so they will be like babies, taking their first breath. Teach them our way so they do not suffer the shame of being useless." Tonowari turns to Jake as he delivers this last line, making clear that they will pull their weight. Like brothers and sisters. To be a stone in the wall of the family fortress. We'll never actually see this part—the Sullys contributing socially or economically to the clan—which is a little disappointing, because it's such an emphasis here in negotiations. We'll get to see the Sully children grow and mature. We'll get to see Jake and Neytiri having nice home-cooked meals and learning to fly skimwings. But we'll never see them give back to the reef-dwellers. Instead, they'll endanger the Metkayinas' lives, and the lives of the Tulkun, and bring fire and death down upon them.

## Breath-holding

The Sullys drag their luggage over rope bridges, webs of woven reeds—Tuk bouncing along on the spongelike surface; the princess guiding them towards their new home. Jake puts on an appreciative performance—"Yeah, this'll work, this is great. Nice right?" You can take a marine out of the Midwest, but you can't take the Midwest out of a marine. Neytiri just sighs, performatively, and drops her shit on the ground with a loud thud. Nice role-modeling mom. Try again next time.

Sunset on the coast is breathtaking, Alpha Centauri and several moons sitting ghost-like over the horizon, as the burning ball of flame casts its golden glow radially across the ocean—lighting up the skeletal, vertebrate-like mangrove roots of the village *marui*. A Metkayina on a paddleboard is seen casting his net, its geometric beauty distracting us from its vicious work of killing. A web of connections—tantras, links—which catches all in its path. Like Kiri’s shawl—a web of life.<sup>26</sup> Jake calls a family meeting, gives the kids the normal rundown. Keep up, help out, and stay out of trouble. “I want to go home,” cries Tuk. “This is our home now,” dad answers; “We’re gonna get through this if we have each others’ backs.” They will learn to breathe a new atmosphere. They will learn a new way of life. Neytiri, sidelined and silent, takes the line in pensively. Her eyes gaze downward, reluctant, but she joins in to play the support role, on a mission she doesn’t fully believe in: “What does your father always say?” Her voice is sad, and resigned, and far from inspiring. “Sullys always stick together,” the teens grumble, but it isn’t enough for Jake. It never is. “That’s right. This time with some feeling!” Jeez; blech, Dad. You’re not only making your teenagers recite your corny-ass mantras, you’re also making them feign enthusiasm? That’s a recipe for bad faith, but it’s Jake’s entire schtick. Like how he asks if they’re okay, and then says “You’re okay” before they can answer. He doesn’t *listen* to his children—he just tells them how they should feel, and cajoles them til they express it. At some point, they quit speaking up. The distinct irony here is that Jake’s vision of a family “sticking together” is just standard military hierarchy; it translates to “do what I say and don’t argue.”<sup>27</sup> In this, he’s stricter than Ardmore, who for all her faults is at least open to suggestion.

Cut scene to morning, and the Metkayina prince and princess are shown from below, as they dive into the water, air bubbles streaming around them. On the surface, Lo’ak and Neteyam give a whoop and follow, half-cannonballing in. The girls shriek and leap after them. The soundtrack of the undersea is the glimmering, glistening, almost magical sound of wind chime and glockenspiel, an ethereal female voice.

Everything around them shimmers and glistens, from the ripples on the surface to the schools of fish. Tsireya, *Tsakarem*, turns over on her back—shimmies through the water and looks back, encouraging, at the Sully kids.

---

<sup>26</sup>Kiri’s a collector, accumulating meaningful artifacts into assemblage costumes “like charm bracelets,” each object-node related through the linkages of twine (D. L. Scott, *Avatar* costume designer).

<sup>27</sup>Not to mention that military command structure, at least in functional units, is far more flexible, with far more bottom-up feedback, than is usually assumed.

Kiri's sidetracked already, admiring the fauna with open-mouthed wonder. Swimming chandeliers and hammerbrow fish. Pincerfish and syringils. Moonrolls and rockbeaks. Starbeaks like tropical puffers, and spadewings like colorful mantas. Cameron's a conservationist, and this is his Great Barrier Reef.

But the forest folk are easily winded—are forced to swim upwards for gasping air as their rudder-tailed peers—looking up toward their egg-beater legs—signal, from below, to continue. Another dive, another surfacing. “What’s wrong with them?” Aonung asks with his hand; they apparently have developed a form of sign language for this purpose. “They’re bad divers,” sidekick Rotxo signs backs. But Tsireya chides her brother and friend—“Stop; they’re learning. “It is a woman who brings together worlds, who bridges the rivalry of men. She swims to the surface gracefully, asks if the Sullys are alright. “C’mon bro, we don’t speak this finger talk, we don’t know what you’re saying.” Everytime a Sully kid says “bro,” I want to strangle him. Once again with the language-in-translation motifs we’ll see this film—the last time was Quaritch by the Old Shack, interrogating Lo’ak. Not so different from: adjusting to another atmosphere. Nictitating membranes flashing cross her eyes, Tsireya offers to teach the Omatikaya. To be a go-between, a mediator, an interpreter. Pocahontas. La Malinche. Sakagawea. Neytiri.

Only at this moment do they realize they’ve lost track of Kiri. An edge of panic enters their voices. But she’s still deep underwater, having never come up for air. She’s surrounded by strange, exotic fish—by brain coral and translucent, jellied invertebrates. She’s never seen the sea before, never known this side of God’s creations. She is in Paradise.

## Gone Native

Back at the Bridgehead, Quaritch hauls his not-son down the runway, gives him lessons on etiquette rundown seeing as he’s raised by wolves. All the recombs are decked-out in tactical boots and Jr. still doesn’t have shoes. If I were giving an etiquette lesson I’d start there. “Get on the ship, find a seat, and keep out of the way. Let’s go, chop chop.”

Just like Sully and his kids. Do you know where the word “rival” comes from? Its root is *rivus*, Latin “river.” A rival is one who occupies an opposite shoreline. The rival was once a brother, but he crossed the river to found a city of his own, and bring up his family there. Now the populations—separated by the causal buffer of the river’s waters—have genetically and

culturally diverged. Though distant relatives in the same family tree, each sees the other as other—as a “them.”

The river is also a shared resource—fish, and drinking water, and irrigation for the crops. A resource which is fought over. And if a bridge is ever built that connects the villages, two outcomes are possible: war or commerce. Commerce has an ugly name these days because it is associated with capitalism, but the basic principle of commerce is merely reciprocity. If labor’s the tit, money’s the tat. Each side of the river, each rival, benefits from engaging in commerce with the other. The rivals are brought into regular contact, begin to understand one another. With understanding comes an increased ability to cohabit, to avoid infringing, to find win-win solutions. The distance caused by isolation and divergence is slowly narrowed; the branches of the family tree begin to grow together, towards the light. Maybe one side births a Romeo, the other a Juliet.

Quaritch explains that Jr.’s oxygen mask has a tracking beacon on it, so if he tries to escape he won’t get far, and if he removes his personal atmosphere, he’s dead. Imprisoned by biology. The Colonel’s tried the carrot, so here’s the inevitable stick. Now we see the five-man squad of recombs amidst the vines and overgrowth of the Omatikaya forests, as Quaritch gives another family briefing to the team. “Listen up. Jake Sully has gone underground. Don’t matter; wherever he is we’ll find him, and his batshit crazy wife too.” Chuckles, nods. *Project Phoenix* is emblazoned on his vest. Now Quaritch’s eyes and voice get serious. Lead with emotion; close with direction. “To do so, we get Na’vi. Full tilt, all the way. That means we eat Na’vi, we ride Na’vi, we think Na’vi.” He continues his speech in the Na’vi: *Ulte tsnaw sngkä’i plltxe Na’vi*. “And that starts with speaking the language.” Sidebar, but it’s deeply ahistorical and unlikely, that peoples as distant as the various Pandoran tribes would speak a single language. There were upwards of a thousand languages on the North American continent, when Europeans arrived, and even Europe’s Latin splintered and evolved into dozens of dialects, which we call Romance languages.

*Ulte tsnaw sngkä’i plltxe Na’vi*. The pronunciation’s choppy, and the sentence ungrammatical; Jr. laughs at him from his perch on a log, arms crossed—standing above them, condescending. “You call that speaking the language?” His accent’s not much better, and the laugh? It’s a forced, ugly, and bitter sort of laugh—the kind that signals bad acting, albeit on behalf of Spider the character instead of Jack Champion, the Hollywood actor who plays Spider. And this is understandable, his try-hard tough guy “fuck you” act. First these guys kidnapped him; now they’re hunting his (adoptive) family. No, what’s surprising is how we in the audience feel. Like

Spider's a jerk-off, a jackass. Rude, disrespectful, ungrateful. It's an odd emotion, this. No matter how fucked up their mission, you can't help but feel that the recombs are just people, at the end of it—and that Quaritch has done Jr. a big favor, taken him on out of love and pity. You don't want to feel that debt, but it's there anyway, and that's how you know Jr. feels it too.

The psychologist Adam Mastroianni, writing on the Milgram experiment—you know the one where normal people were enlisted to shock each other to death, and willingly did so if a lab coat technician told them to?—says:

People use the shock studies to show that humans are, deep down, meek little sheep who want to be told what to do... But in fact, Milgram's studies show that people really really do not want to do evil. As they work their way up the shock machine, people get more and more distressed. They ask the experimenter to stop. They want to go check on the learner, or even switch places with him. They start emphasizing the right answers when they read the questions aloud so that the learner won't get them wrong... These people are not psychopaths or mini-Eichmanns. They don't want to hurt anybody. So why do they keep going? I think the answer is much more heartwarming: they really want to do a good job and not make anyone mad. These are neighborly folks who agreed to help with a scientific experiment. They've accepted a check, so they feel extra obligated to follow through. The experimenter has been polite and professional the whole time, and now he's telling them everything will be ruined if they stop. Every prosocial norm in these people's heads is telling them the right thing to do is keep going, except, of course, the one that says "don't kill anybody." But the situation is confusing and the harm feels at least a little uncertain—why would someone want to shock someone to death for science? Why would Yale [the sponsoring institution] allow this? ... People are stuck between their desire to help and their desire not to harm, and in this situation, the desire to help tends to win out.

We trot [Milgram's Experiment] out to explain the Holocaust, the My Lai massacre, Abu Ghraib, and every other tragedy committed by people who were "just following orders," assuming that the offenders were duped into evil by their "hard-wired impulse

to obey.” We don’t consider the possibility that perhaps these men were inspired into evil by traits we might otherwise consider admirable: loyalty, duty, brotherhood, patriotism, honor.

This passage kept popping into my mind as I watched and wrote about *The Way of Water*. Because the marines really do express discomfort at some of the war crimes they’ll be asked to commit. “What’re we doing here, boss?” We must imagine that the Colonel—even the pre-recomb, paper-thin character from the first film—sees himself not as a murderer, but as a good soldier. As a loyal servant of the United States Marines, who devoted to protecting and promoting the interests of Americans abroad. At a time of extreme crisis, when the nations of the world are in perpetual war. Sees himself as a defender of democracy. A shield for freedom. A brave warrior. The kinds of words Neytiri uses to describe Jake, when she first meets him and chooses to spare his life. For all its camp, Tarantino’s *Inglourious Basterds* is deadly serious about this one thing—what is triflingly called “the banality of evil,” by folks who fail to understand the concept—and the Bear Jew scene, where Donny Donowitz beats a decorated German officer to death with a Louisville slugger? That scene plays it all out. “What’d you get that medal for, killing Jews?” “Bravery.”

Anyway, Jr. insults Quaritch, i.e. the commanding officer of the unit, to his face, in front of his men, and Quaritch handles it with surprising grace. You have to remember what his position entails, the things he can and can’t let slide. He might not have a problem with his kid negging him in private, but here, it’s a provocation of authority. The men? They already assume he’s playing favorites, that he’s got a softspot for this nutcase and his painted-on stripes. Miles Sr. leans back on one foot and smiles, and his squad smiles with him, the tension broken. He’s taken it easy, he’s relaxed—now comes the hammer. “Alright, smart guy. You just went from being our monkey mascot to official interpreter.” Wainwright’s smile broadens, and he lets out one of those villain chuckles—hunh-hunh-hunh-hunh-hunh.

So they’re going native. Why? Because the situation demands it. And if to survive, you must change to fit your environment, well then it’s like Erving Goffman always said: Not men and their moments, but moments and their men. This is what sex is about: mixing it up, varying the gene pool to adapt to new worlds. And sex, as much as it’s a means of genetic survival, is also genetic suicide. Half the proteins make it; like all successions, you can’t pass down everything. You barely set the terms. *Turn and face the*

*strange ch-ch-changes... Just gonna have to be a different man...*<sup>28</sup> And all these changes? Make for shifting party lines.

They're going native. The guys who most looked down on the savages are now living like them. Reincarnated in the bodies of their enemies. *Avatar*'s Ship of Theseus problem is a central dilemma of drama: a protagonist, threatened—trying to save his life, his family, his country, his cause—loses himself along the way. Perhaps he becomes a monster to slay a monster, or a machine to slay a machine. Perhaps he uses the weapons of the enemy to beat the enemy. Perhaps he is traumatized by conflict and thus reenacts the cycle of violence—taking it back to the garden with him, like Euripides' Herakles. Killing in the name of peace, his soul is corrupted; he subjugates his people, binds them together in service of a war so devastating that victory looks like defeat—the sacrifice demanded being nearly as great as the crisis averted. He loses an arm, a leg, a hand, a finger, an eye. He becomes a cyborg, a hybrid accepts compromises previously unthinkable, dresses in dark cloaks and hides in the shadows. (*Like Vader.*) He sacrifices his daughter to the winds, for his wife-saving fleet. (*Agamemnon.*) A perverted inversion of dharma—child dying before parent, child sacrificed to save the parent. The twist with Jake is he started out as this monster, as a marine instead of a warrior, and it's the reappearance of old enemies that drags him back in his process of transformation, like how the appearance of a sore-spot ex threatens an AA resolution. And Quaritch, well—he's gotten into this mess for revenge, but either way the result's the same. He starts out working on behalf of some historical self, some memory of anger and rivalry. But the situation's changed—he has changed—and as he continues to change, walking the old path makes less and less sense.

## Banshee-taming

Back in Awa'atlu, the new kids learn to bond with their ilus. Brother Aonung leads with threat—"If you want to live here, you have to ride"—and Sister Tsireya closes with advice—"Make the bond gently." When the queues connect, the ilu's pupils dilates and darts, almost frantic, and it groans. "Feel his breath. Feel his strength." Lo'ak breathes deep, lets it all out, closes his eyes. "Hold here." Then his ilu's off, and Lo'ak not quite streamlined—the speed of the passing water contorting his facial muscles, ripping first his legs, then his grasping hand from the ilu's saddle. The

---

<sup>28</sup>David Bowie.

coastal princes laugh and it's cut shot to Papa Sully, trying the same thing but with a skimwing, assisted by Tonowari and two of his warriors.

Of course it's a metaphor, the way a bucking bronco or mechanical bull is a metaphor—a metaphor for life, for leadership; for mastery, and for uncertainty. Not so far, these slippery beasts, from Menelaus wrestling Proteus in Homer's *Odyssey*. Man conquering nature, man taming nature, living symbiotic with nature. He gets thrown because of course he gets thrown; this entire film is Jake getting thrown. Also appropriately, he gets thrown in exactly the way Tonowareg warns him he will get thrown, when he gives advice pre-ride, but Jake just waved him off. "Remember, when you dive back in, good position. Very important. "Yeah, ahuh. I got this." Normally I'd say like father like son, except Lo'ak approached the task with some humility—let himself be guided and taught. Jake... doesn't think there's anything anyone can teach him. Brave is one word for it. Stupid and arrogant are two more.

There's a blurry line between bravery and stupidity—see e.g. drunkenness—but there is a difference, and it matters, and I'll try my best to gesture at it briefly. There is a confidence, or self-assuredness, or even certainty to bravery. The hero may struggle internally, arguing against himself, exploring other options, but some deep, ultimate part of him already knows what he must do. It's the doing that's the trick. He cannot know the outcome, cannot know whether he will succeed or fail, but he does know that doing and succeeding is the only path to the destination he's after. Rather than prolong this inevitable, or refuse the call to adventure, or deceive himself as to the viability of alternative plots, he accepts his fate with courage.

Stupidity, on the other hand, does not even consider other options. The stupid recklessly neglect even asking whether their actions are likely to further their goals—whether there might be more effective and reliable courses of action.

And then we see Kiri's first bonding attempt. We get five bonding scenes all in a row, and the way each approaches his bond tells us something about the character. Lo'ak and Jake's attempts run parallel, each pulled off the same way, clinging one-handed yet overpowered. Quaritch's banshee-bonding—stay tuned—follows the footsteps of his rival's, a decade prior. But Kiri... Kiri's bond is all her own. She's on her knees as if in a trance or religious worship, at the bottom of the sea, just watching, staying present. An ilu approaches and circles her, speaks to her in its clicky, echolocative tongue. It nuzzles against her, and she smiles. There's no pursuit here, just an outstretched hand and eye contact.

Now for Quaritch, rivalrous brother across a great river of ocean. Cut scene to Miles Jr. scrambling up the floating islands of the Hallelujah Mountains, jumping across great chasms and swinging across vines. It's hard not to think of Tarzan, scenes like this—with his long brown dreadlocks and bare chest. They've written Miles to act like a child. "Come on, keep up losers!" he shouts to the recombos trailing behind him. It must affirming, this moment—that despite their having precisely the biology he lacks, he has the experience and culture to make up for it. Is more Na'vi than their Na'vi bodies. And this must really rub—that his captors get to live out his deepest wish: to be blue. All his life he's wanted nothing more than to be fully Na'vi—or at least, as Na'vi as the Sullys—and here's his fucked-up father, everything he hates and everything he longs for.

At last, the recombos reach the perches of the banshees. Quaritch scopes them out with a tranquilizer rifle, and Miles again ridicules him. "Na'vi kids younger than me do this with their bare hands," he says. Quaritch is taken aback by this info—he really seems to process it, and his face changes. "Jake Sully did it the hard way?" Jr.'s voice is full of scorn and contempt; he nearly spits: "What do you think?" The Colonel just smiles, his Na'vi canines showing. This is what rivalry does; this is what brotherhood is about: inspiration, the ability to accomplish feats otherwise off-limits. The Colonel puts down the rifle. "This is gonna be good," says Miles, addressing the audience, telling them to grab their popcorn. Quaritch walks right up to the banshee, brave but stupid. Unlike Jake, he has no cultural knowledge to speak of. He doesn't know how to pick his banshee, or how to tame it; he doesn't even know to connect his queue. But he goes up to his enemy, and it bares its fangs and hisses in his face, and he bares his fangs and hisses right back.

Jr. reacts like a YouTube vlogger on the sidelines and it just feels false. Not just because he's acting like an American teenager circa 2015—everyone in this film acts like that. But because he seems not to have any stakes here. As if he's in it purely for entertainment. Like no part of him cares whether Quaritch lives or dies. What you'd expect is a deep ambivalence: some part of him hoping that his enemy is killed, the other hoping that his father-reincarnate survives. We'd expect him, in other words, to be torn between the fates of two families—between Sully and Quaritch. Maybe that *is* what's going down; maybe he's filled with such deep simultaneous love and hatred that it just comes out as cringe. The joke that tries to cut the tension, but can't be said with the requisite levity. A mocking which disguises—is terrified of—the possibility of attachment. Jr. laughs: "Did I mention you're supposed to tie the mouth shut first?" What a gleeful little shit. It's

not that he's wrong to sabotage Quaritch—although it might be a tactical mistake to kill off his only ally, the impulse is understandable. It's the way he goes about it; it (A) has no tact, no sense of guile or intentionality, and (B) is so annoying it makes you sympathize with the bad guys for putting up with him.

Quaritch plummets over the edge, and the squad rushes after him. They wait and wait. Not just their leader, but their family member is down there, in the fog. A strange sort of father—just some crazy guy grown in a lab with stripes slapped on him, but they're all lab-grown too, floating in the same way he's floating: not sure who they are; not sure where they're going.

But it's been too long; they don't have visual contact. They assume the worst. Eyes down, a bit grim, they start trudging off the mountain side and for the first time we see emotion from Miles. Maybe he's just embarrassed, or ashamed. Maybe he feels like he has to perform remorse for other marines, but he's normally not so clever. He seems genuinely glum, his face set, his abdomen distended, his eyes downcast. Then a banshee rises above them, hovering in midair, the Colonel on top, whooping, and the squad whoops with him. He's bonded with a creature of Pandora, a creature of Eywa.<sup>29</sup> He's survived this most difficult of trials—despite all ignorance, despite Spider's bad advice. And something like admiration comes across Jr.'s face as he smiles and shakes his head. Not so different from Neytiri, coming across her own enemy in the forest so many years ago. Admiring, despite herself, Jake's courage.

The more connected the Colonel becomes to Pandora, the less he's a Colonel, and the more he's just plain old Miles. His body belongs to this place; it breathes Pandoran air. His tongue is learning the Na'vi tongue. His son is here, his mission is here, his military family's here. Now he's bonding with the megafauna. His journey follows Sully's to the T.

One takeaway I had from reading all of Jacob Clifton's incredible *Farscape* recaps—let's call it Clifton's Unified Theory of Sci-Fi—goes like this: Science-fiction is fundamentally premised on the horrifying discovery that the Other is inside you—has either always been part of you, or has recently got there—“contaminated” you.<sup>30</sup> (Contact and contagion: all

---

<sup>29</sup>The queue bond's closest Terran proxy the sexual symbiosis, which may “take the form of a profound mystical experience,” in which “individual boundaries seem to dissolve and the partners feel reconnected to their divine source” (Paul Wyld). Making the banshee-bond another step in Quaritch's identity dissolution, his integration with nature.

<sup>30</sup>This also squares with Lovecraftian theories of horror (the unknown & spatiotemporally distant Other, penetrating the domestic-familiar) and Campbellian mythic cycles (where the hero leaves the familiar behind in search of the Other).

these words share the Latin root *-con*: together; touching. See also *connect*, *confide*, *collaborate*, *cooperate*, *coordinate*, *compete*, *combat*, *combust*, *conduit*, *commerce*, *commit*, *compadre*, *company*, *complement*, and *complex*.) This theory helps make sense of the historical relationship between sci-fi and Westerns (think *Firefly*, *Star Trek*) and also the conceptualization of space as a colonized frontier, because the Unified Theory represents a frontier politics moral dilemma. There's a reason all these stories happen in the provinces and ports, on asteroids and mining colonies, penal colonies and desert outposts and scrap metal junkyards. In uncharted territories and twilight zones. Maybe it's Ender and the insect colony, or Skywalker learning Vader is his father. Maybe it's Scorpius, stuck in Crichton's head. But the all-time archetypal example has to be the *Alien* franchise—all its pregnancy and parasites. *Learning there's an alien inside of you, feeding off you.* And this stuff has a lot in common with what happens, germ- and disease-wise, when two radically isolated cultures (e.g. Europeans and American Indians) come into contact with one another. It's related to the female psychology of giving birth—of becoming a host to a creature that is sucking the life-water out of you—(more sex as suicide)--this alien you are incubating, who comes from outside of you and yet is entirely its own thing. (And the relation is fraught: the interests of mother and child aren't always aligned, which over millions of evolved years leads to subtle forms of complicated warfare. Mothers' bodies will try to abort unhealthy fetuses; fetuses will send misleading signals, to extract more nutrients. Oliver Griffith, at the University of Melbourne, describes pregnancy as a "battle for resources," replete with enzyme-on-hormone violence.) Anyway, if I were to write about Clifton's Unified Theory, I would use Way of Water as a primary case-study. Cameron's entire career is about encounters with difference—Mother vs Bitch, Jack & Rose, Sarah Connor and Arnold's Terminator—but Avatar pulls out all the stops. Every possible combination and "recombination" is explored. The foreign is always getting into and mixing with the familiar, until it is integrated as familiar. The familiar is always getting isolated and speciating until it becomes foreign. The Sully family is adopted into the Metkayina clan, in a messy brother-sister incest. The Sully family itself is an assortment of mulatto outsiders. Humans like Na'vi, Na'vi like humans; five-fingered freaks. Bonds are being forged, broken, and reforged between man and man, man and woman, man and machine, man and animal, man and Eywa—through neural links and psychic implants and queue tendrils and plain old everyday empathy. We can call these linkages tantras—bonds or interweavings. And all this

ties into the overarching Ship of Theseus theme: What does it mean to persevere, to preserve yourself, to survive?

One last note on the Sully-Quaritch connection. Yes, Quaritch is a foil for Sully, and vice-versa, but foil is a reflective surface. The only reason we'd think to contrast two characters is if they're similar enough to suggest a comparison. Canon holds that, when the second wave of Skypeople showed up in Pandora's atmosphere, Sully advocated a pre-emptive strike. What was the RDA motto in the first film? "Our only security lies in pre-emptive attack."

Hit them before they could set up shop. Maybe that makes Jake more marine than Na'vi. Maybe the gambit would've worked. Maybe it wouldn't have. The indigenous tribes of the American East Coast faced a similar dilemma when Europeans showed up. Push them to the sea? Wipe them all out? Maybe it wouldn't have mattered, given how zoonotic diseases did the hard work of clearing the continent. But there are scholars who've argued that if they had put up more resistance—if they'd allowed no beach head—and if there hadn't been zoonotic epidemics, the Americas might never have been conquered. It's a whole lot of hypotheticals. Some American generals thought we should've bombed the Soviets back in the 40s, before they ever got the Bomb. These questions are fraught; it's hard to run the counterfactuals of political decisions and epidemiological outcomes. What makes *Way of Water*, and the entirety of the *Avatar* series—however it ends—a tragedy is that its conclusion is inevitable. Pandora holds resources unspeakably valuable to humankind. The planet is El Dorado on steroids. It was bad enough last film: Massive reserves of energy that make Saudi oil look like AA batteries. The key to high-speed space travel, in the vein of Arrakis's spice. Now, they've also found a cure for aging ("amrita," in the Tulkun's brains) plus a second homeland, for a dying Earth. The stakes of 16th century colonialism, by contrast, are paltry: a fair bit of silver; some real estate for religious fanatics. And humankind out-mans and out-guns the Na'vi by orders of magnitude. They're better organized and they're better armed. As the kids say: There is no timeline where the Na'vi make it out of this thing. No matter what Jake does, no matter his heroics or lack thereof, the macro-fate of his adopted people is sealed. Has been sealed, since before the first film started. Everything now is prolongation of this inevitable. Natural Selection, the Lady of Life & Lord of Death. Goddess, whose only counter is prolongation and economy. Goddess, indefatigable and invincible. The only victory against her is born of Grace.

## **Part III**

## The Way of Water

Tsireya leads the Sully children as they sit in a circle, legs crossed in lotus position. “Breathe in,” she says, and demonstrates. “And breathe out. Imagine a flickering flame. You must slow down your heart rate.”<sup>31</sup> Rotxo is being unusually helpful here, perhaps in the absence of pain-in-the-royal-ass Aonung. He mimes the actions and waves his hand in a gesture that illustrates the flame. Water, fire, air. “Entropy increases with melting, vaporization or sublimation.” Tsireya puts her hands on Lo’ak’s chest as she teaches, igniting a flame of her own.

If the romance set-up weren’t obvious, now we get a gag: “Lo’ak, your heartbeat is fast.” “Sorry,” he says hurriedly. “Try to focus. Breathe in—and breathe out.” My friend Luke Heronbone says that the in-breath is will, and the out-breath is submission. And this, too, is relevant.

Neteyam and Rotxo snicker at the transparency of Lo’ak’s crush—more bonding at the expense of the others. Kiri, in her least sympathetic moment all movie—and there are several; for a next-coming-of-Jesus character, she’s awful condescending—gives them an eye roll, and a look like “Oh brother.” She has so much appreciation for the intricate workings of nature, and so little for the workings of mankind. By which I mean Na’vi-kind. She thinks they’re being immature—superficial, crass—and they are, but they’re also finding a path toward connection. And it’s hard to overstate how important this is, for the Sullys at least. They are exiles, without allies, hunted by an undead psycho marine to the edge of the earth. They have a foothold here, among the Metkayina, but it’s precarious. One real conflict could tear them free, cast them out again. This is the first time we’ve seen any of the boys get along.

By sunset, the coral and amber colors all around them, Lo’ak and Neteyam are riding their ilus. They surface, gasping but whooping and laughing, triumphant. Tsireya is right there beside them. “You are learning to breathe.” The in-breath is will, the out-breath submission.

The best scenes, in these films, are scenes of teaching. These are usually one-on-one scenes, *tête-à-tête*. Often but not always a man and a woman. The woman teaches the man; she plays the priestess, and he the initiate.

---

<sup>31</sup>Crucial to holding one’s breath underwater, we learn, is staying calm. *Mawey, Na’vi, mawey*. Warding off stress or anxiety. Kiri does this best and is consistently calmest, whereas the adults can’t do this naturally, need to be talked through it by the kids. This makes sense: there is a sense of heightened stakes, of responsibility, that comes with adulthood and parenthood alike. Symbolically too it makes sense: water is fluid uncertainty is nature, and Kiri is more at home there.

She shows him her world—how to navigate it, stay alive in it, master it. Which plants are edible; and where to look for air pockets.

Tsireya and Lo'ak sit on the tidal rocks, breathing deeply. It's just them now, and her hand is on his belly, but it doesn't feel flirtatious so much as sacred. "The way of water has no beginning, and no end." She delivers the words as mantra—as song, as prayer. "The way of water has no beginning, and no end." She takes an oyster shell and tosses it into the water, where it sinks below the surface. Lo'ak breathes his last great breath and follows it down, down. Descends from light to darkness, in big breaststroke scissor-kicks, past branching coral and columns of minnows. Sunlight shoots down in great shafts from above, and swirls of air bubbles dance from his nostrils like schools of fish. He is diving deeper than he ever has before. "The sea is your home before your birth and after your death. Our hearts beat in the womb of the world. Our breath burns in the shadows of the deep." Lo'ak has the bivalve in sight now, and he swims towards it, outstretches an arm. His heartbeat throbs in his ears, their drums tight from pressure. "The sea gives, and the sea takes." He snatches it, turns, looks upward towards the surface a world away. There is still so far to go. "Water connects all things." Tsireya is there, on the other side, a distant silhouette shimmering and broken by the surface, and he swims towards her, swims towards the light, his lungs beginning a long muted scream. "Water connects all things. Life to death; darkness to light." And when he breaks through, to the other side—gasping, holding the shell above his head in triumph—the first thing he shouts is her name.<sup>32</sup>

The shell is shaped like a crescent moon, with a half-ring of pearl-sized holes for a mollusc's respiration. Sea stars prey on abalone by covering those holes with their tentacles, asphyxiating them. Water connects all things. Life to death. Darkness to life. Bivalvic walls, and a gate to let the stream through. Lo'ak's prize is the calcified exoskeleton of a once-living thing.

And now we see Tsireya explaining to Tuk and Kiri how to breathe underwater using gill mantles—invertebrate animals which look like butterflies, or angel wings. Tsireya uses a knife to pry off a Pandoran clam, and her violence is foiled by Kiri, who sits serenely underwater, directing a school of fish like the conductor of an orchestra. Kiri serves regularly as a sort of rejoinder, whose radical pacifism illustrates the latent violence—the master motifs—of the Na'vi around her. Rather than dominate an ilu or banshee, she befriends it. Rather than use living creatures for tools, she speaks to them, communes with them, and they follow her requests by free volition.

---

<sup>32</sup>Wormhole to *Book of Pearls*, and Lucia Joyce as (Newsomian) diver.

When we see Kiri next she's floating face-down in the shallow waters right off-shore—staring at what seems to be a small black snail as it crosses the rippling ridges of sand. Her viewframe is zoomed in like a microscope. In her own little world, her own amniotic sac—the warm water an isolation tank, so that she can't hear or see or feel anything, so that the very boundaries of her skin dissolve into nature. A Metkayina gang rolls up, led by Aonung, and by gang I mean family, by gang I mean friend group, by gang I mean war party. They're here to bond at her expense. "What is she doing?" "She's just looking at the sand." They laugh, point. Only now does she come up for air, and notice their presence. "What did you say?" "Are you some kind of... freak?" Aonung taunts. "He asked if you were a freak," his henchmen parrot. They sway and leer, trying to intimidate her; the four of them encircle her, preventing her from leaving and de-escalating. Form a hostile boundary around her, walls to keep her in. She just shakes her head and sighs. Then Lo'ak sees them, and his blood runs hot, and he charges in. This is the logic of connection. "Back off, Fish Lips," he says, determination and anger lighting up his eyes. They mock his tail like they're mocking Kiri's hands. Ugliness in this aquatic Eden, in this breakwatered Paradise. If the French orientalized Tahiti, the Tahitians occidentalized France. (See Melville, fascination of the Typee.)<sup>33</sup> That's how it works—human nature—and it goes way beyond humans.

Now Neteyam notices, runs over, and the music changes. The sound of drums: something deep and echoing and ancestral, like thunder. One become two; two become three. This is the logic of connection. "You heard what she said. Leave them alone." He has his father's face and eyes and tone of voice. But his strength of assurance, and his fierce defense of kin? Is all Neytiri's. His words are spoken with enough authority to establish a fact.

Neteyam ignores the henchmen, brushes them aside. They don't call the shots, and they don't matter. He looks straight into Aonung's eyes, so deadly serious that it punctures something, and the smile disappears from his enemy's face. Neteyam puts a finger on the boy's chest—not asking, but telling. It's almost too far. It's exactly far enough. One of the gang tries to cut the tension, laugh it off—"Big brother coming to..."—but Aonung cuts him off. There is something new here, a sudden recognition of the situation they're in, and of a rival and peer—a brother-in-war. It hits like a

---

<sup>33</sup>Melville's *Typee* a founding document of South Seas lit—a premonition of a tiki culture to come. (Wormhole: "Pagan Energies.") Tsireya Lo'ak's South Seas girl; and Lo'ak like Gidget, initiate of the coast, learning to surf and swim.

thunderbolt. It speaks in the rumbling echo of Quaritch and Sully, facing off forever on the brink of a void. All their attention sit on one another. And if you make prolonged eye contact for that long, the expression goes, you're five seconds from making love, making peace, or making war. Neteyam enunciates clearly and forcefully: accents his plosives, his voice staccato. "Now." He bares his teeth as he says it, and Aonung cocks his head, and decides it's not worth it. His ear twitches; he puts his hand up, steps back.

Neteyam consolidates his triumph with a proffering of contract: "From now on, I need you to respect my sister." It's almost too far; it's exactly far enough. These showdowns are the stuff of Western legend, and they're always confidence games. Your self-assurance testifies to the force you command, without requiring a more deadly demonstration. The henchmen hiss, and Kiri sticks her tongue out, making a face—who's the pre-teen now, Kiri?—but the agreement is clear. The big brothers—the adults, because that's what they're becoming—have reached an understanding. A peace has been brokered. But peace is a fragile thing.

Part of being a leader, having the authority to broker these sorts of agreements, is about being able to keep your family—your gang—in line. You keep your guys in check, and I'll keep mine. A leader is vested with the authority to make a deal on behalf of his people, because his assurance is the assurance of all his tribe. So Neteyam tells his brother and sister "Let's go," and tries to rubber-stamp the peace accord with an amicable exit.

The Metkayina henchman can't keep his mouth shut, needs a final word to persist the fiction of dominance. "Bye-bye!" he taunts, as Aonung stops him, puts a hand on his shoulder. But then, the Sullys almost out of earshot, Aonung's wisdom buckles to temptation; he can't resist a jab of his own. "Look at them. They're all freaks, the whole family." Lo'ak closes his eyes, stops, turns, and punches Aonung out, and soon all them are wrestling in the shallows: pulling each others' tails, hissing, tossing each other over. Neteyam's in the fray, too, holding his own, but Kiri just sits on the sideline. "So stupid!" she shouts, but then can't help but laugh, like watching children on the playground. "My ear, let it go; he's got my ear!" It's funny except it's deadly serious, like Lo'ak and Tuk fighting over the banshee toy in the film's first minutes. For now, this is just kids being kids, figuring it all out on the road to brotherhood. But under different circumstances, moments like this are the beginning of a blood feud. And this, too, is the way of water. Water, vying with itself. Water, that divides and makes rivals. Water, speciating and in conflict.

## Beyond the Break

Jake, of course, is furious. “What is the one thing I asked?” he demands from a bloody-nosed Lo’ak. It’s a rhetorical question—a call-and-response that reaffirms his authority. Why ask real questions, when you already know everything? Neteyam tries to step in and take the heat, but Sully—for the first and perhaps only time this film—knows exactly what’s up: “You’ve gotta stop taking the heat for this knucklehead.” He knows who started it, because he would’ve done it himself. Reprimanding Lo’ak is like reprimanding himself. But “do as I say”: it’s easier to lecture others than lead by example. Lo’ak says that the Metkayina started it, that they called Kiri a freak, and Jake softens at this—closes his eyes, turns away. It’s a callback to Neytiri with her bow, eclipse-stalking, her sights trained on the recombs that hold Miles and Kiri. First you soften, then you turn away and re-steel yourself to the necessity at hand. “Go and apologize to Aonoung,” their father orders.

It’s sane and even sage advice, but then he immediately fails to give anything approaching fatherly guidance. “I don’t care how you do it. Just go make peace. Just go.” And to cap it off: “Get out of my sight.” That’s because Jake doesn’t know *\*how\** to make peace. He barely knows how to fight. All he knows is how to submit, and how to channel the bitterness and humiliation of submission into the domination of his wife. But that’s a hard thing to tell your son, let alone admit to yourself.

Kiri sulks about how she wants to fit in, while wrapping Mealsquares in mallorn leaves. “Why can’t I just be like everyone else?” I’ve heard it said that your greatest longing reflects the sacrifice you’re least willing to make. That the temptation to eat your cake remains unfulfilled because what you want, even more than, that is to keep it around, and the wants are incompatible. Kiri longs for the benefits of fitting in, but she won’t pay the cost, which is hefty, and her unwillingness to make the requisite sacrifices reveals a deeper structure of desire: Kiri *\*doesn’t\** want to fit in, or not enough. She’d prefer to stare agape at undersea flora than socialize with her peers, or learn to make small talk, or “stoop” to teenage ribbing. And even though she hates to be the butt of the joke, hates the trouble her difference causes, she’s unwilling to renounce that difference. Because here’s the thing: everyone is different, and no one is normal, and although there are real differences in the distance people have to travel to become part of the group, ultimately, your willingness to give up your individuality, to sacrifice your own quirks and sync up with others, is the deciding factor.

Lo'ak? Is willing to go the distance. He takes to the waters on his ilu, tries to make up with the boys per Father's orders, and when he apologizes, they seem to accept it easily, as a matter of course. Lo'ak and Aonung shake hands, and Aonung suggests they go hunting outside the reef. "It's where the men hunt." You want it to be true: that they've put it behind them, that they gained some respect for each other through conflict. Lo'ak is in dutiful-son mode, so at first he doesn't accept: "No way, I'm not allowed." "I must be asking the wrong brother." Which is all that's needed. "Let's do it." To be a younger brother means to be born on the periphery; because belonging isn't handed to him, Lo'ak is more desperate to secure it. The Metkayina boys yip, warlike, and take off, riding their ilus like jet skis over the waves—big airborne jumps, the wind blowing their hair back, one hand gripping their steeds, the other their weapons. One of the functions of a royal hunt—not just leisure—was to simulate battle.

The group pulls up in calmer waters near Three Brothers Rock: large karst-like formation that will reappear in every climax of this film. Lo'ak is ecstatic, so high on the ride, on the invitation—so overjoyed to be with his cousins, to be part of the tribe—that he's let down his guard. He doesn't \*want\* to keep his guard up, doesn't want to be skeptical; all his hope and desire to be part of their family makes him vulnerable, and ingenuous. Aonung says he knows a good spot, and shares a look with his brothers.

Richard J. Hertesveldt, *Yosemite Valley Place Names*, gives our name-sake gloss: "Three Brothers Rock: ...named by members of the Mariposa Battalion following the capture of the three sons of Chief Tenaya near the base of that formation." Tenaya an Ahwahnechee leader, who reassembled his fragmented tribe in the 19th Century, bringing them back to a Yosemite homeland. And the Mariposa Battalion? A California militia unit, mustered to forcefully relocate the Ahwahnechee. But only fairy tales are this black and white. Yosemite: a name given by the peaceful neighboring Miwok to the warlike Ahwahnechee—meaning "those who kill." The Yosemite valley itself chosen as an Ahwahnechee homeland for the high, fortress-like walls of its cliffs.

The boys go diving among the coral, and when Lo'ak turns around, his escorts have disappeared. He's successfully speared a fish, but he just leaves it there, twitching and dying as it sinks toward the sandy ocean floor. (A recurrent shot, the twitching fish: a shot which ends the movie.) But Lo'ak? Has bigger fish to fry. A shimmering school of minnows scatters as ominous, digital horns blare on the soundtrack, announcing the approach of an *akula*, which looks vaguely like a lipleurodon, or a dunkleosteus, or some other ancient, flesh-shredding sea monster. We get the *Jaws* shot, of Lo'ak on

his ilu from below like a surfer on his board—and then, from above, we see the akula's mouth gape open like a trillium spreading its pedals—as it chases first the ilu—which has bucked its rider—and then—turning—spots the stranded Lo'ak, snapping his ineffectual crossbow and eating through the coral labyrinth that Lo'ak seeks for shelter. The sea-beast beats its tail and writhes as it breaks apart skyscrapers of coral, as it hammerheads an entire city block of reef like a comic book villain destroying Manhattan. (Glass blown out; steel crumpling; structure turned to rubble and dust.) Lo'ak starts running out of air; his hiding spot is also his prison, his grave, great wrapping bars of coral all around him, and his body begins convulsing, carbon dioxide leaking out in small spurts of bubbles. He has to make a break for it or drown, and he does, and now the akula spots him, rounding a bend of reef, and Lo'ak turns, drawing his knife, facing his enemy with whatever bravery he can muster; he can hide no more. The whole film's plot in miniature: as he turns to fight, he is spared by the deus ex machina of an even larger—a Tulkun, which rushes in from off-screen, ten times the akula's size, and crushes the shark against the reef. (Dust and rubble where it smashes.) Lo'ak passes out from lack of oxygen, unable to surface.

## A Young Diplomat

“Coal-black seas towered up on all sides, and a glittering myriad of tropical stars drew a faint reflection from plankton in the water. The world was simple—stars in the darkness.”<sup>34</sup>

Lo'ak awakens to the sound of Pandoran gulls, cast up on what appear to be rocks—but then slits open up in the hard armored plates, and air vents upward from a blowhole: he is resting on the floating island of a Tulkun. Lo'ak slides down the side of its breached body, breaststrokes toward its eye, and tries speaking to it—thanks it and expresses his debt. The Tulkun grunts something that Lo'ak can't quite understand, but he follows the great whale's gaze—this sort of joint attention being unique to higher intelligences, and often connoting some form of culture—and notices a rusting harpoon lodged in its fin, which he helps remove. The harpoon is metal: in other words, man-made. (This too, a reference to the colonization of the Americas: metalworking a European tech.) Then the pair swim together, sunlight glinting in heavenly rays around them, Lo'ak holding onto one of the Tulkun's great fins, like a handshake, the symbiosis establishing alliance.

---

<sup>34</sup>Thor Heyerdahl, *The Kon-Tiki Expedition*.

Nighttime and we cut to Kiri, sitting on a walkway at the edge of the family marui, gently treading her feet, as bioluminescent fish swirl towards her from every direction. Drawn to her like moths to a light. Jake, who never pays attention to anything or anyone, punctures the moment, sitting down beside her, plopping his big legs in the water so the fish scatter, and she just shakes her head and sighs and covers her head with her hand and she starts tearing up, and he asks what's going on. At least it's a real question. "I feel her, Dad. Eywa. I hear her breathing. I hear her heartbeat. She's so close. Just... there. Like a word about to be spoken." She's so much wiser, so much more profound than her father, and he doesn't know what to do about it, and she doesn't know what to make of it either. Some waters run deep and others shallow. "I know you think I'm crazy," she says, and he does the pat parent thing, of putting his hand on her shoulder and assuring her that he doesn't think any such thing. He does a decent job of it too; his face is open and non-judging, and he asks softly what Eywa's heartbeat sounds like. Not a skeptical reduction, a disenchanting, but a taking-at-face. "Mighty," Kiri answers—and then Aonung and Neteyam roll up, Aonung having come clean about Lo'ak's disappearance, and a search party is assembled. He didn't have to do that—didn't have to say anything—but he did.

Meanwhile, past the break, Lo'ak and his Tulkun are cruising along, not a care in the world. They look up at the stars, and the bioluminescent patterns on the Tulkun mirror those on Lo'ak's body, which mirror those in the sky, and the reflections of that sky upon the dark ocean waters. "My father came from a star," he tells the Tulkun. That's the shadow Lo'ak lives in. A father like a god who descended from the sky, from the stars, to start a family. The irony is that Jake Sully was given the most generic, unexceptional John Doe name imaginable, cast with the most generic, Average Joe actor to play him. Then they hear the whoops of the search party, and Lo'ak, worried about the trouble he'll be in, splits off to return to the village.

Both sets of parents, Metkayina and Omaticaya, are a predictable mixture of fury and relief. When Lo'ak dismounts from the ilu of the clan member who has found him and brought him back, he sees Aonung—still with a prominent black eye—standing amidst the gathered crowd. There is a fighting look in Lo'ak's eyes, a kind of quick anger as the boys make eye contact, and Lo'ak, shaking his head, begins to walk with intent towards Aonung, as if preparing for another fight. But Jake intercepts him, inspects his body for injuries—"Are you OK? You're OK."—and certifies him undamaged goods. Neytiri runs up, her stressed shoulders slumping, and then her relief turns to anger: "I pray for the strength that I will not pluck the eyeballs out of my youngest son."

And then something magical happens. Tonowari, head of the Metkayina, accepts full responsibility. “No. My son knows better than to take him outside the reef.” Aonung looks down, and his father, chieftain of the tribe—another shadow—clasps a hand on his shoulder and pushes him downward, to a humbled, kneeling position. Jake, always already in over his head, and lacking anything in the way of diplomatic skills, says “Okay.” Literally, “Okay,” and then tries to dip out. But Lo’ak knows better. His anger has melted into solidarity. “No,” he says, eyes fierce and determined, and for a second we think he’s coming for Aonung, looking for blood. Instead: “This is not Aonung’s fault.” A look of surprise crosses the older boy’s face, its tension softening, his eyes looking up, his ears folding back. Lo’ak: “This was my idea. Aonung tried to talk me out of it.” It’s brilliant and inspired: Somehow, Lo’ak is a little diplomat, despite having two parents who are stubborn and impossible to deal with or talk to. And Jake? Rather than recognizing the gesture, rather than being rightfully proud of his boy? If nothing else for his honesty, and his accepting of responsibility. Is just disappointed. He looks down again, ashamed, and continues his attempt to exit the interaction as quickly. “Come on,” he tells Lo’ak; “We’re going.” “I got this,” he whispers to Tonowari, as if he “had” anything under control, as if he weren’t already several steps behind the plot. That’s called literary irony, reader.

“Dad, you told me to make friends with these kids,” Lo’ak preempts, ready for punishment as the family heads home. He’s trying to explain his rationale—not just for going past the reef, but for taking the blame off Aonung—but it’s telling that he doesn’t trust his father enough with the full truth. “I don’t want to hear it,” Sully cuts him off, nearly hissing. He never wants to hear it. Any feedback from the environment would merely pollute the purity of his vision. It’s a bit like Rupi Kaur, the poet who never reads others’ work, because it would “contaminate” her voice. As if one’s voice or vision were ever pure, were not already hopelessly contaminated, were not constituted purely by contamination to begin with. As if feedback were not the only way we learn. Jake is impermeable. “Thick,” is the slang. He doesn’t let the world in. He neither lets the water in, nor flows with it. He tries to be a rock, but a rock sinks to the ocean floor and is never heard from again.

“Any more trouble, I jerk a knot in your tail. You read me?” he threatens. “Yes sir. Lima Charlie.” More military speak—“Loud and clear.” Broadcast received, I read you. Lo’ak summarily dismissed, Sully can turn his anger and impotence towards Neteyam, and blame his son instead of

himself: “Sorry sir,” Neteyam apologizes. Quaritch has never seemed more sympathetic.

## The Outcast

Quality time with the cousins turns sour as the Metkayina princes and princess insist that the Tulkun Lo’ak claims to have befriended—a Tulkun named Payakan—is a “killer,” excommunicated from the tribe. He “is outcast, alone, and has a missing fin.” A missing fin like an extra finger. As precarious members of their family—both the Na’vi tribal family, and the Sully nuclear family—Kiri and Lo’ak both empathize with, and are closer-related to, other outsiders. As peripheries of these familial unit, they are *connected* (linked) to the outside. That’s what it means to be peripheral. Miles too, and watch how that turns out. The attitude of the family (or tribe) towards any outsider is a barometer of its attitude towards Lo’ak, so he has a stake in fostering an ethos of hospitality and a tolerance of difference. By making the case for others, he makes the case for himself.

So Lo’ak rejects their narrative, which is really their culture’s narrative: they didn’t see any of it happen personally; they’ve never seen the killer Tulkun; but they’ve heard about it through several mediations of remove; and it defines how they orient themselves to the world and to this particular animal. And they try to initiate Lo’ak into their way of knowing and being and acting, which is a form of invitation into their culture, and he rejects it, because it requires him to cut someone out. Inclusion premised on exclusion. He rejects their cultural narrative because of his personal experience, and because of his alliance with the particular animal in question, the debt and recognition he feels. Being younger, and having already several times now made a fool of himself on this big family reunion—and being an outsider and newcomer to the Metkayina world broadly—Lo’ak really isn’t in a position to contest their cultural narrative; he doesn’t stand a chance of doing anything except making a fool of himself, which he recognizes, which heats him up even more and pretty soon the steam’s coming out his ears, Neteyam steps in to try to salvage the situation with a flattering re-frame, all, “My baby bro, mighty warrior, faced the killer Tulkun and lived to tell about it.” A shallower Na’vi would go along with this. Lo’ak just snarls and storms off.

It doesn’t always go this way, the way of Lo’ak’s empathy: precarious members will just as often become the hostile defenders of the perimeter, border guards who see in new entrants to la Familia only jeopardy to their own membership. They’ve done studies on high school pecking orders, and

the popular kids never bully. It's a bit like how poor whites, in the antebellum South, were often the most committed to maintaining racial hierarchies: it kept them from being the bottom of the pyramid.

Inclusivity is merely a check on the tendency of families to define themselves in active opposition of an outside—a process which, in its dramatic form, takes the shape of scapegoating. Let's talk *Alien* quickly, because of Cameron's experience directing the second film in the franchise, and because both cast Sigourney Weaver as heroine, and because both make a big deal about atmospheres and airlocks, and because there are a thousand other themes shared between the series.

## **Alien (The Abyss)**

T. Caldwell, *Screen Education* 2010:

With the alien queen as the monstrous version of motherhood facing off against Ellen Ripley (Sigourney Weaver) as the nurturing version of motherhood, the hyper masculine marines are at best rendered ineffective and at worst killed or used as incubators... The ruthless corporate interests at play in *Aliens* [are] more reflexive of the parasitic aliens than the values of most of the human characters... The monstrous femininity in *Alien* was further emphasised through the naming of the *Nostromo*'s computer as Mother, which on company orders treated the human crew as expendable. The symbolic conspiracy between the alien and the company is further established in the scene where Ash (Ian Holm), the crew's android who was acting under orders from the company, tries to suffocate Ripley by forcing a pornographic magazine down her throat, repeating the image of sexualised oral violation.

In *Avatar* it's Eywa the company rapes, but same difference. There's a long history of anti-corporatism in movies, in part because capitalism is a defining system of our age, and in part because of the inevitable clashes between the monied interests needed to fund Hollywood cinema, and the artistic self-identifications and values of the directors who interface with the monied. We get this shady, parasitic, manipulative backroom-boardroom vibe quite explicitly in Lynch's oeuvre, but it's in plenty of science fiction—off-world exploitation; colonial and mining operations. (See in particular

*Alien: Romulus.*) That's not to contest Cameron's narrative—just to contextualize it. Capital is plenty happy to take your dollar (or more accurately, your new Harriet Tubman twenty) to see an anti-capitalist blockbuster. The projections for this film's total international gross exceed three billion. That's RDA money. And this makes perfect sense: it's a tragedy of the commons, where the damaged commons is something like "pro-capitalist sentiment among the American public." The harm to corporations is distributed; the benefit to the corporation that produces the movie is concentrated.

Caldwell again, taking a page from *Sexual Personae*:

While not overtly masculinised, the *Nostromo* crew and their dilapidated mining ship were products of industrialisation and therefore represented the forces of civilisation (traditionally aligned with masculinity) opposing the threat from the natural world (traditionally aligned with femininity and overtly so in the *Alien* films). Set 57 years later, *Aliens...* [introduces] a strong military aesthetic... a heightened masculinity to face off against the heightened monstrous femininity of a large nest of aliens with a queen alien at its centre... Private Hudson's (Bill Paxton) boast about the marines ends with him almost in an ecstatic rapture as he lists all the weapons at their disposal... The mechanical body of [Ripley's exoskeleton] defeats the natural abomination [of the alien]...

What's important here is that the basic structural-symbolic getup hasn't changed much in *Avatar*: mecha versus meat, civ v. nature. It's one protective momma versus another, all over again and forever. But in *Avatar*, the sympathy of the camera's switched sides. Human civilization is revealed to be, or to be hijacked by, or to have spawned a logic of expansion that much resembles the aliens of *Aliens*. It's the classic post-colonial trope: "What if we're the savages?" (A line which Melville pursues in Polynesian *Typee*, by the way.) And this is because both man and alien are products of the same evolutionary logic. "The species is socially structured like an insect colony with a queen at the centre doing all the reproduction while her workers/drones go out to find bodies to be impregnated. By aligning the aliens so closely to the insect world, *Aliens* is able to remove all audience sympathy from them as being part of the natural order. They are not a misunderstood species that only attack when provoked but are a deadly

parasite<sup>35</sup> that destroys other life so that it may continue.” (If you’ve seen *Farscape*, this is all sounding awful familiar, very “I, E.T.” and “Exodus from Genesis.”) The amp-suit exoskeleton that Quaritch uses to duel with Sully, in the first film, is the same exoskeleton Sigourney wears to beat the bitch back with in *Aliens*—except now Sigourney’s a Na’vi and the aliens are us. One hand protects, the other kills.

Cameron’s 1989 *The Abyss* is like a slant-rhyme of both *Avatar* and *Alien*, a bridge that connects their conceptual systems.<sup>36</sup> Coffey is Quaritch; Virgil is Jake.<sup>37</sup> The blue-collar workers are Na’vi; the SEALs are the Marines. The corporation is the corporation; and Lindsey is Grace. Only by giving himself up does Virgil save himself; Cameron: at the end of the film, humanity is “found to be worthy of salvation because of a single average

---

<sup>35</sup> Parasitism: one of the most powerful evolutionary strategies. Carl Zimmer, parasite expert and author of *Parasite Rex*: “There are over a million species of parasitic wasps. Of all the animals in the animal kingdom, the number one form of animal is a parasitic wasp.” They control their hosts’ minds, and feed off their hosts from the inside. “Once those wasps are ready, they blast their ways out of the host and if that’s lethal to the host, fine, that doesn’t matter... Getting inside something else and feeding on it from within is a really great way to survive and evolve. The alien is just fitting into this fundamental basic pattern that you find in life, probably the most successful way to be alive on earth.”

<sup>36</sup> The SeaWasp, for instance, gets its name from an underwater camera rig built by the director’s brother, Mike Cameron, for the making of *The Abyss*.

<sup>37</sup> The damaged, DeepCore drilling platform is a metaphor for Lindsey and Virgil’s marriage. (The way all Jake’s fleeing is a metaphor for his and Neytiri’s marriage.) “If we can’t get out of it, may as well get into it.” Down to hidden depths. And all that work, all that intricate structure of a relationship—dented, damaged, springing leaks, flooding. Putting the fires out. Sealing off hatches, partitioning and compartmentalizing and preventing the water’s spread. The storm, the power outages, the severing of communications. The collapse of the crane that tethers them to the surface, to the rest of the world. Their undersea home being pulled—via umbilical, natch—by the anchor-like weight of the crane, plummeting, pulling them into the abyss. The crane that was supposed to lift them up.

We get all these shots of Virgil and Lindsey with flashlights and tools and circuit breakers, you know—very mechanical, work that’s hands on but still quite technical and complex. Which you see popping up a lot in sci-fi, e.g. *Farscape* and *Alien*. A cousin of this trope is bomb-defusal scenes; see the Bond and Marvel films. I think this stuff is popular because it lets you externalize and represent processes of troubleshooting, fiddling with, fixing up interpersonal problems that are otherwise hard to visualize. The couple gets to be a team, an economic unit, which is lindy actually—go to the Met, check out the papyrus tapestries in the Egyptian wing and you’ll see all the old Egyptian couples farming, catching fish, hunting birds, together. Many traditional marriages are defined by this ongoing coordination, this shared project that is both economic and familial, a vertically integrated metabolic factory, and nowadays? The main realm this remains somewhat true for is kids. The economic stuff is all cut up, the unity of couples atomized. Husband and wife belong to the corporation—more accurately, to two different corporations, a house divided a la *Mr. and Mrs. Smith*.

man, an Everyman, who somehow represents that which is good in us: the capacity for love measured by the willingness for self-sacrifice.”

The first thing we hear, as *The Abyss* opens, is the ping of sonar, and the first thing we see is an endless, undifferentiated sea of blue. Then the slow shape of a submarine, like Kubrick’s black-slab monolith.<sup>38</sup>

A military sub. Nothing more terrifying than being in a submarine, a tin can underwater. A single breach of airlock—well, it’s just like outer space. That’s the first clue. *Alien*, underwater. We’ve mapped more of the lunar surface than we have our own ocean depths. We see the monolith go down, punctured by an unknown. That “science fiction but underwater” theme is all over the film. The suits, the air locks, the way they walk across the sea floor like it’s the moon. The emphasis, in the sound mixing, on assisted respiration. We get repeated shorts of the pressurization and depressurization process of the deep sea. Of the transition between atmospheres, between worlds, in and out of membranes.

Next, a buncha working class oil workers get promised a big company bonus if they answer the sunken sub’s distress call. Corporations and militaries collude with a callous disregard for Joe Sixpack’s life. Ed Harris’s aptly named Virgil “Bud” Brigman is a shepherd of his people, who—like Ripley enforcing quarantine protocols—courageously faces down authority and the implicit threat of pecking order for the good of his guys. “When it comes to the safety of these people, there’s me and then there’s God, understand? If things get dicey I’m pulling the plug.” There’s a search among ruins for signs of life, and the growing realization that something terrible has happened at the site. They send down search subs that look like the spacecraft from *Close Encounters*, coming over the hill in the night. Then it happens to them too. Like walking onto a murder scene, the killer waiting in the shadows. Like finding a charred skull near your camp. And the killer, in some sense, is always hubris. All the way down to the bottom, sometimes. Military hubris, nuclear hubris, corporate hubris, human hubris. The complexity stacks, becomes unmanageable. Little fault lines emerge in the structure, in the assumptions baked into the structure: unnoticed, they grow and merge; the precarity compounds; pretty soon the structure that keeps you alive is tearing apart, letting in the abyss that surrounds you.

And when at last the gang makes contact with the alien—with a Non-Terrestrial Intelligence; a creature made of pure water—Linsey reaches out

---

<sup>38</sup>The ending of *The Abyss* is a direct reference to *2001: A Space Odyssey* and Spielberg’s *Close Encounters*. As a teen, Cameron watched *Space Odyssey* in theaters; the closing gave him vertigo, and he threw up on the street afterward, but couldn’t purge the memory; when he went to write *The Abyss*, he framed it explicitly as *2001* set underwater.

her finger, touches it, brings back one of its droplets, and tastes it. Puts it inside her. Samples the other. Lets the other be integrated, into herself. Incredible openness. The vulnerability of a child, for better and worse. The SEAL guy, Coffey, immediately amputates the creature in half, then shrinks back in terror when it's unharmed. Fear and aggression, the same impulse. Offense and defense, the same movement. A victim's cry for protection is a cry for violent aggression. Except Cameron's saying that Coffey's psychotic, i.e. he's lost contact with reality. By extension, he's saying Lindsey's sane, and that military aggression is insane.

The last major thematic echo between *Alien* and *Avatar* concerns motherhood, but we'll wait for the notorious SeaDragon scene to get there. The scene that sees Miles Jr. cowering behind ship's cargo, terrified, as a blood-lust filled Neytiri hunts down any human in sight.

## Eclipse

Enough archaeology—back to Pandora. Cousins—minus Lo'ak, off bonding with fellow misunderstood outsider Payakan—head for the Cove of the Ancestors, the Metkayina's most sacred place. Na'vi sacred sites consist of a Spirit Tree (or “Tree of Souls”) and floating islands of stone, held aloft by magnetic vortices, with “Beanstalk”-like vines. Floating castles, suspended heavens—little Edens with cascades and mists, covered in verdure.

(The Tree of Souls shows up in the Jewish tradition, within Edenic Paradise, surrounded by the world's four winds. All the world's souls grow on this tree, and when they are ripe and fall, they fall into a Treasury of Souls, where they await their birth into world.)

The children arrive at eclipse, the last golden sliver of sun slipping behind a boundless black mass. Another shadow. They swim underwater on their ilus, then separate from their sea-steeds and free-dive to the Spirit Tree—*Ranteng Utralti*—connecting their queues with a kind of eager, nervous curiosity and closing their eyes as DMT-type portal visuals suck them into dreamland. Hooking up to these Spirit Trees gives the Na'vi spiritual visions; they're almost psychedelic, which makes sense: One, because these are teens hanging out in a beautiful place together, rebelling but also exploring their world and themselves, and Two, because ayahuasca is cooked and extracted from the chaqruy shrub and the “soul vine”—*Psychotria viridis* and *Banisteriopsis caapi*, respectively, to Westerners—which makes a spirit or “soul tree” not so great a leap.

It also makes sense insofar as Cameron's a seasoned psychonaut with his fair share of plant-assisted visions. Some of those visions seem to have directly informed *Avatar*:

I was standing in front of the bathroom mirror with a carton of milk... and I had this strange perception of myself... I saw myself as an earthworm in the sense that I was a tube that took elements from the world in at one end and passed them out at the other end... and the entire Living World consists of tubes of various types that take part of the physical world in one and pass it out the other end and that's what they do and all of the other functions, whether you're a fish and you have fins, or a bird and you fly, or you're a human and you walk upright—all of those things are only pertinances to the basic function of getting the tube to a point where it can ingest matter from the world and pass it through itself and go out the other end. Meanwhile, it has to avoid other tubes which want to pass it through them.

Eat or be eaten. Life as a process of deconstructing other life, to keep the flame of metabolism burning. The RDA as one enormous metabolism, one huge earthworm, consuming worlds and shitting them out.

Back on Pandora, the idea is you hook up to Eywa's memories, her “neural network”—that's the language of a Terran scientist talking—and are transported... somewhere. You travel through a tunnel and end up somewhere new, somewhere in the future or past, somewhere far away, somewhere that might be.

(Sort of like cryo. For 15th century Europeans, to sail across the ocean was to sail back in time: all the philosophical speculations, about the state of nature, and primitive man, suddenly given referent, exemplified in object lesson. And the same is true of Earthlings, arriving on Pandora. The civilizational ladder does not imply “better”—plenty of canonical white men have claimed just the opposite—but it does mean “more complex,” and that, at least, is measurable.)

Or else hooking up to Eywa's like... “What will I see in the mirror?” “Even the wisest cannot tell, for the mirror shows many things. Things that were; things that are; and some things that have not yet come to pass.”<sup>39</sup> Kiri—played by Sigourney Weaver—breaks through to find her mother Grace—also played by Sigourney Weaver—sitting in her old lab, a glowing hologram model of the spirit tree in the same electric blue as Na’vi

---

<sup>39</sup>Peter Jackson, *Lord of the Rings*, Galadriel to Frodo

skin, the same electric blue as the *Ranteng Utralti*. The whole room is bathed in that blue. “My beautiful daughter,” Grace says. “I’m so happy to see you, but you look troubled.” Kelp is draped over Kiri’s shoulder; beads dangle from her hair. She belongs to the water now. She rushes to her mother, hugs her, begins to cry. The scene changes around them from aquatic blue to jungle green. Home, but also site of war. Her mother is no longer Grace Augustine, human xenobiologist, but Kireysi, avatar. Her face has gone from kind and loving, to sad concern, to a sort of shocked regret, with hints of indescribable darkness—even a touch of menace, or cruelty. At this moment, she seems almost untrustworthy, as if a demon, some misleading spirit. “Why am I different?” Kiri asks. “What does the great mother want with me?” Instead of trees, the verdure that surrounds them makes a Gothic cathedral; we see them, mother and daughter, standing under arboreal spandrels. They are grasping each others’ forearms, in a gesture that seems at once loving and trusting, and also literally captivating, imprisoning, a kind of enmeshment or tethering, a kind of grasping control. Like the queues; like symbiosis. “Who was my father?” Kiri asks, and Avatar Grace just starts choking out, spazzes and dissolves, sucked into blinding white light, and Kiri is sucked back through the portal as well, blue electricity engulfing her like a tesla coil, like the veins of an iris, and we zoom out a frame, out of her head and into the ocean, where we see her tethered to the Spirit Tree—to Eywa, Great Mother—and herself spasming, eyes in the back of her head, her entire body lit up electric with stars. Like a skeleton, glowing, struck by lightning. They get her breathing, take her back to the village. This is the second time that the kids’ explorations, their little bonding trips, have ended in catastrophe. Third time’s a charm...

Jake summons Norm in a rotorwing: for their kids, they’ll pull out all the stops, try anything. This is his greatest mistake, in a film which consists of a series of his mistakes. The rotorwing’s tracked, which leads the marines to discover the Omatikaya fugitives—and the Metkayina tribe which hosts them. A carelessness bringing pestilence upon all their lands.

This is the logic of connection. Every link is a vector for contagion, transmission, contamination. A bridge across spacetime, directing and conducting the causal ripple. The chopper’s route connecting Omatikaya fortress with Metkayina safehouse. Bringing exactly the war which they promised not to bring, when the Sullys arrived.

## Epilepsy, or, The Varieties of Religious Experience

So. Over and over again, the teens get up to trouble, something goes wrong, and the parents are terrified. The parents try to rescue the kids to mixed results. Soon, the whole planet's dragged into the mess. It takes a village...

Now we get a showdown of indigenous and Western medicine. Norm shows up with an iPad, can't detect anything wrong. "How is she?" "Still unconscious," relays Dr. Obvious. We see him with his futuristic tablet, lit up electric blue with a brain scan. "There's no bleed, no fracture, no effects of apoxia." Tribal drums kick in, and a pregnant Ronal, coastal queen—mother of the free-divers, leader of the reef people—struts authoritatively to the site of Kiri's examination. Her posture slumps at the sight of Norm and his technology. "I see that I am not needed here." But Neytiri stops her, hissing "You are Tsahik!" Ronal orders that the tech and tubes and IV are removed; next we see smoke and acupuncture, Ronal murmuring magical words. (Anthropologist William Buckner calls this "the oldest trick in the book," a form of "sucking" or extraction magic whereby the shaman performs the removal of a purportedly embedded object—sticks, stones, thorns, worms, toads—which he often conceals and reveals through sleight of hand. Yet spiritual maladies need spiritual cures...)

Norm and Sully confer outside: "She said she could feel Eywa, she could hear her heartbeat." "That is classic frontal lobe epilepsy... You see visions and states of religious ecstasy." Meanwhile, Ronal is working up exactly such an ecstasy: hyperventilating, sucking spirit-toxins out, releasing them into atmosphere, away from the body. Perhaps it's clear which side Cameron takes, because midway through one of these respiration-exorcisms, Kiri's eyes open. "Kiri, my sweet child," Neytiri mutters, crying and relieved. "My sweet little girl."

Always on the verge of loss. What happens when she's pushed over the edge?

## **Part IV**

## Lost in Translation

Up on a banshee, over turquoise & tropical waters, the Colonel and Miles Jr. ride side by side, swapping words. Jr. mocks the Colonel's pronunciation but in a gentle, loving—rather than bitter, scornful—way, now, and the Colonel can tell the difference. Specifically, Jr.'s teaching Sr. to pronounce "*Oel ngati kameie*," or "I see you." This sense of sight is a particular philosophical concept of the Na'vi, and not merely a perceptual marker; it refers to a kind of "true" sight unbiased by the baggage of personal interest and history—a recognition of Other which goes beyond whatever instrumental or relational meaning that Other might have to you (as asset, as master, as enemy).<sup>40</sup> "I see you" will mark a major moment of actualization in the relationship between Sully and his youngest son Lo'ak. And perhaps it marks such a moment here. To say "I see you" in such a context is to say "I finally see you, I have *learned* to see you, I was blind but now I can see." So this is Miles teaching his father, teaching *himself*, to see him(self). Trying to make his marine father Na'vi, and the first step is through language, the world-carving interpretation schema which structures our perception and understanding. There are benefits to having a local show you around, and the marines have gone native, learned the basics of the language—are trying to blend in and learn local ways to better track Sully—but adapting to the planet, and its people, also means sacrificing a part of their old self. Everything we become, is something we unbecome. Their previous selves were geared to the project of marinedom, protectors and avengers of humanity. Now, they've been brought back and reanimated in Na'vi bodies, speaking Na'vi but still nominally tasked to carry out old missions. Future installments of the films will tell—but in the long-term, this is an unsustainable trajectory. Adaptation is a process of losing oneself to save oneself, of becoming Other in order to survive. In the ecologic of Pandora, Quaritch is maladapted, misfit. His conversion narrative? Becomes an inevitability.

Anyway, Jake phoning in Norm's rotorwing and useless medical supplies has tipped off the marines to the family's (approximate) position, and the cute Miles-Miles father-son bonding sesh is cut short by Quaritch's promise to have Sully's scalp. Bio daddy v. adopted daddy; raised by wolves, and adopted by men; old order? Versus new. Quaritch and Edie Falco stand knee-deep in a projected, three-dimensional map of Pandora as they strategize. "The signal was intermittent and they lost it out over the open sea,

---

<sup>40</sup>Greater mutual understanding means greater ability to coordinate, to find and suggest mutually beneficial arrangements, to coexist in positive sum ways. Symbiosis, like a queue.

but if you project the track it hits this island group.” “That’s hundreds of islands, a big search box, hundreds of villages.” But Quaritch is dead-set on his goal, and requests transport.

Cut-shot and Quaritch’s marine squad of enlisted banshees settle down atop an enormous rotorwing worthy of admiralty, with four massive “contra-rotating ducted fans” that each individually dwarf the size of a standard copter. The Avatar Wiki tells me this ship is called an S-76 SeaDragon, part of the CetOps (“Cetacean Operations”) fleet. A whaling vessel: We’re going fullbore Melville. Quaritch dismounts, addressing two graying men in gas masks. “Are you Scoresby?” “Ahuh. Are you the asshole who’s commandeering my ship?” The brusqueness doesn’t need excusing or forgiveness or even retribution, because it signals that the captain understands fully his role, and his subservient position in the hierarchy. The ship’s bespectacled marine biologist, Ian Garvin, introduces himself as Quaritch lets them know they’ll be searching dozens of villages and using his craft for possibly months. At this, the captain attempts a final protestation. “I hunt Tulkuns. That’s what I’m rigged for, that’s all my guys do. I’ve got quotas to meet.” Quotas to meet: he’s torn between bosses, his offense is defense, he’s getting crunched from both sides, just trying to keep breathing room. But Quaritch reaffirms the pecking order, and the captain submits: “Well, if you can’t get out of it, get into it! All crews to station.” It’s a good line.

Cut to a magnificent, much-hunted Tulkun pod in all their surface-breaching glory. For the moment, they are safe, coming into Metkayina harbor, welcomed by royal escorts. The Tulkun—a kind of cetacean, although that evolutionary designation doesn’t really make sense on an alien planet—are all tattooed, which shows us something about their symbiosis with the Na’vi, and their cultural integration, and also symbolically stands for their role as bearers of cultural memory; whenever the pod comes into town, they exchange stories and news with the Metkayina. Ronal announces them as “our brothers and sisters”—la Familia—and all the village takes to the sea for a proper welcome committee. If you didn’t know, cetaceans are *ungulates*. They are *hoofed animals*, like cows and sheep and goats and pigs and deer and elephants. These are *grazing* animals, even if, on leaving land for sea, they lost their hooves and limbs and swapped their grass for animal plankton. And maybe it’s worth crunching some math, so we recognize that the relative pacifism and non-violence attributed to some species in this film—and the relative aggression and violence of other species—are each much closer to each other than they are to some imaginary poles of “pacifism” and “warmongering.” So let’s run the back-of-the-envelope calculations: A single krill plankton weighs around a gram. There are nearly

500 grams to a pound. A blue whale can consume five to fifteen tons of krill daily, at two thousand pounds to the ton. That's as many as sixteen *million* krill a day. A few hours of whale feeding? Is a holocaust.

"In their endless cycle of migration, the Tulkun had come home." They have elaborate, swirling Polynesian and Pacific Coast tattoos along their white underbellies, and they blow smoke (bubble) rings like wise old wizards from their blowholes, that the children swim through and puncture. Ronal, carrying a child, expresses recognition of a Tulkun, *I see you*, and the Tulkun returns the gesture in turn, giving kind eyes, and a young one emerges from under her fin. "Your son is beautiful," Ronal says. Elsewhere, Tsireya tells her pairbond that she "met a boy"—cut scene to the boy in question, floating face-down, peaceful but pensive, watching the proceedings. An outsider.

Cut back again and we're aboard the SeaDragon, docking in the harbor of some poor village of islanders who are about to pay the price for Sully's self-serving decisions and compounding errors. The mecha's exoskeletons tear up the town for weapons or comms; then they show (on a virtual screen) a mugshot of Jake Sully, like this is a Western film, and Sully's our wanted bandit. "We know this man resides somewhere here on the islands," Quaritch says. The *olo'eyktan*: "We are a totally different clan. The man in the picture is from the forest." Miles Jr., stuck in the middle—*traduttori, traditori*—helps translate and (with limited efficacy) keep the situation from escalating: "They never saw him; these are sea people. Forest people don't come here." Except, well—on the one hand it's a classic "You think Africa's a country," "We're all the same to you" accusation that marginalized, colonized, and minority castes constantly toss at their dominators. On the other hand, Quaritch isn't confused or stupid; he has solid intel, already understands (if it weren't obvious from the radically different skin tones and geographic location) that the Omatikaya clan is out of place here, and knows that they're hiding somewhere, dark blue and conspicuous. In a later scene, Tonowari will more or less confirm that this tribe's *olo'eyktan* is in fact aware of Jake's presence, and stays mum precisely at Tonowari's orders.

Anyway: Like Kiri telling her siblings to stay calm when captured by Quaritch, Miles Jr. shouts "manwe" to little effect. It's a nice touch, that Miles admires Kiri, that he'd pick up little gestures and mannerisms and tactics from her. Quaritch threatens to kill their queen, their tsahik, as Miles grows increasingly hysterical, incanting over and over, "I don't want to be a part of this. What you're doing here is wrong. Please don't do this." A mohawked female recomb blows her bubblegum; UV glasses recomb asks "We really gonna waste her?" He doesn't sound enthusiastic about the project. Meanwhile Quaritch's mouth is half opened; he seems torn and

indecisive, rather than a sadistic killer. Perhaps his half-son's morality-check is getting to him; perhaps it's his big blue body; or maybe this was always Quaritch: a hardened soldier, sure, ready to do what it takes sans remorse—but with enough sense of honor or ethic to find the murder of innocents distasteful. His ears twitch, sensitive, alert—conscious. There are touches of humanity—to use a word which is inappropriate on so many levels—that we get from the marines, and it elevates the moral seriousness and complexity of the filmmaking which is otherwise cartoonish. What I think Cameron's trying to get across is: These marines care about doing their job well. They might not be models of virtue, but they're not evil—at least not as individuals, even if the net result of their institution is evil. Reading them as oppressive, violent predators is an accurate reading from the Na'vi perspective, but from the marine perspective, they are loyal. They follow orders. They're serving and saving their species. They're hunting down a traitor, a turn-coat who killed uncounted numbers of their own. They want to do a good job, and serve their superorganism, and be a valuable member of the squad. Maybe they want honor and glory and adventure too. But who doesn't, human or Na'vi?

But whatever his moral stance, Quaritch is also stuck. He can't lose face in front of his team, or in front of his enemy. Can't just cave to his child or risk accusations of favoritism, going soft, going native. So he finds a compromise: spare the tsahìk, burn the village. Fire gushes from amp suits' flamethrowers. "Stop this madness!" the tsahìk begs Miles Jr, but he can only apologize, and soon every home on the storefront is in flames. All that wasted energy, structure, time, effort, all that niche construction, that habitability—curling up in the entropy of smoke—destroyed for the sake of communicating a single, costly message to Sully. Surrender, or I'll keep going. It's brutal and it's beautiful, like Quaritch is trying to find some way to be humane in a wartime project that is fundamentally inhumane.

What do we make of a civilization whose primary form of entertainment, the action film—whose sub-genres include war films, spy movies, and the top-grossing superhero/comic book franchises of the 2010s—employs as its bread and butter the *explosion*? The rapid combustion of structure. Molten metal. Michael Bay shit.<sup>41</sup> Extreme increases in entropy. Matter mushrooming into gas plumes. Flashy, showy destruction. Films which feature extended scenes of great men being tossed among glass and steel

---

<sup>41</sup>Mark Hofmeyer's Rotten Tomato report counted 1649 explosions across Bey's filmography, averaging 0.8 explosions per minute of film; it also noted an inverse correlation between explosion count and critical reception, and a positive correlation between explosion count and popular box office.

skyscrapers, which shatter, break, buckle, and collapse from the impact of their combat, a collateral damage. Here, we'll see its echo in the swimming of the Tulkuns, supposedly peaceful, nonviolent animals, whose form of play involves smashing entire coral reefs with their enormous tails. Whole ecosystems, entire cities, demolished, become rubble. In their mindless joy, Shiva the Destroyer.

## The Belly of the Whale

"I have it, I have it," cried Stubb, with delight, striking something in the subterranean regions, "a purse! a purse!"

Dropping his spade, he thrust both hands in, and drew out handfuls of something that looked like ripe Windsor soap, or rich mottled old cheese; very unctuous and savory withal. You might easily dent it with your thumb; it is of a hue between yellow and ash color. And this, good friends, is ambergris, worth a gold guinea an ounce to any druggist. Some six handfuls were obtained...<sup>42</sup>

Now we see the message get through. Tonowari, clan chief of the coastal folk, walks grim-faced up to Sully's house on stilts. Sully and Neytiri are laughing at the dinner table, smiling, but when Neytiri sees his face, her ears flex back and the smile disappears. "What's wrong?" Sully asks. "Sky People." Jake closes his eyes. "Did they kill anybody?" Tonowari stares off into the distance, pictured in profile, his ears pulled back tight against his braided black hair. "Not yet." A pause, a throat-lump; Tonowari turns to face them. "They threaten, but the villagers will not tell them where you are on my order." This show of loyalty is nice until you remember that it's loyalty between members of a ruling class, over and above loyalty to the ruler's people. Tonowari's first concern should be the well-being of his tribe. But the Sully-Omatikaya family is becoming his family now too; he seems them as equals, peers, heads of a tribe from across the sea. And his people will die to protect this prestigious foreign warrior who should not be here in the first place, who, if he were brave, would not endanger innocents for his own self-preservation. Now a cut-shot to Neytiri slicing turnip-like fruits or tubers—beginning the process of deconstructing, the application of heat and fire to organic matter in order to break it down, digest and consume it. The violence of the knife is the violence that spans this film. One motion,

---

<sup>42</sup> *Moby-Dick*. (& wormhole to "Polytheism, or, an Ecology of Practice.")

one act. Offense as defense: eating, so not to starve. Sully sits in silence, letting his wife do the cooking. She wants to go after Quaritch; he insists they “be smart”; she asks what their plan is. He has no plan. He’s an all-time impotent protagonist, spiritually empty, behaviorally passive, and in the middle of an identity crisis. (“A father protects; that’s who he is.”). Cut shot to another village in flames while Sully’s brain times out and he performs the appearance of thinking. “We are looking for Toruk Makto! Has he been here?” There is no plan, and others will now suffer for it. Quaritch, on the other hand, is active, a hunter, talking tactics with squad members. He has a coherent strategy and is working toward its fulfillment, and almost every prediction he makes comes true, because he makes them come true. “If we turn up the heat, [Sully’s] just gonna keep running. We gotta draw him out,” the Colonel speculates. Now for the next phase of operations. Time to kill some Tulkuns.

Now we see Lo’ak—swimming on the surface—from Payakan’s perspective, as signaled by the yellow lens tint and audio distortion. They’re bonding over their shared outsider status; Lo’ak wants to hear the story of how the Tulkun became an outcast. We see the rest of the Metkayina and Omaticaya kids, swimming through the sea kelp, watching the Lo’ak and the Tulkun from a safe distance. The pair face off and Payakan opens his great jaws, an abyss in front of Lo’ak. And Lo’ak, brave but foolish to the end, takes the invitation and swims straight in. Into utter darkness, cut-off from orienting light, from the life-giving oxygen of the surface. The jaws shut behind him, ominous. In the darkness, there are tattoo-like swirls of stars, Milky Way constellations, bioluminescent systems of dots—and a single, feathery tendril reaches out its golden invitation. It’s like the first time Jake experienced Pandoran night: the forest inside. Lo’ak connects his neural queue, and suddenly experiences Payakan’s memory first-hand: the Tulkun pod, getting hit by sonic detonators; blood and bodies everywhere, both Na’vi and Tulkun. All that wasted energy, all that wasted structure and complexity. Lo’ak, released from the neural bond and the Tulkun’s belly, swims up to the whale’s eye, looks deep into it—saying without saying: “I see you.” I’m sorry, he says, I’m so sorry. A helpless echo of Miles Jr., just a scene prior.

When we see American scientists doing the same Tulkun-penetration (into the belly) it’s an echo of Norm vs. the tsahìk. What the Na’vi do naturally, intuitively, elegantly, and with Tulkun consent, the Americans do with an armada of tech, a mechanical exoskeleton. So here they’ve hunted down and pried open a whale, lifted it onto land, and entered it in haz (NBC; they’re combatants) suits. All for “amrita,” the nectar of immortality—

liquid gold—which channels Clinton-and-Thiel style vampirism. Immortality at a price: suck the vitality from the young, the brilliant, the vital, in order to prolong the decrepit, the old. A sick, dharma-inverting logic, to sacrifice sons for fathers instead of fathers for sons. These white men, all mixed up, clinging sentimentally to a single body, a momentary incarnation, a single sentence of an endless book. In Eastern European folklore, the vampire is the go-to symbol for this dynamic; in Abrahamic traditions, we have Moloch, who demands child sacrifices, and whose worship by the Children of Israel is banned by Moses (proxy for the Lord).

Now Amrita, in the versions of Hindu cosmology with which I am familiar (there are many), was a nectar desired desperately by the *jīvas*—mortal & lowercase-g gods who desired, above all else, to live forever. All this serves well as a stripped-down allegory for life’s basic impulse: the perpetuation of itself, the desire to indefinitely maintain homeostasis. And these *jīvas* are “crumpled” insofar as they are still in the process of unfolding, are inward-facing and closed off, degraded and unenlightened, ego-dominated. The body itself is an endless, crumpled and involuted world. The struggle for self-preservation Its interior is vast and unknowable: the intestines run for miles, hosting uncountable colonies of bacteria, endlessly splitting and differentiating themselves, being wiped out by tidal forces, a play of elements and engulfing systems they cannot control. Vying clans, clogged byways, express lanes, traders and pirates, accounts and administrators, warriors and scientists. All this and its fractal complexity is born of water, is incubated in water; each cell becomes its own water sac, stocking flows, self-incubating its own amniotic residents inside.

I watched a YouTube review of *Way of Water* where the host, Grace Randolph, mentioned that amrita is a much stronger moral quandary than your average 19th whaling expedition, because it saves the lives of humans. And I mean, this is true. But she also says “It used to be used to make candles, and you’re like, I can’t believe we used to kill whales for candles, it’s so stupid and so horrible.” She’s become so modern that candles, to her, are a form of decor. Set the mood, maybe scent your room. But candles, before electricity? Are light. If you didn’t have kerosene or blubber you lived in the darkness. Once the sun sets, little work can be done. A basement is unnavigable. Light is one of the most beautiful things there is, and one of the most useful. It feels like it’s given freely by the sun, and it is. But only on her hours. Only in the places she freely travels. Elsewhere, other times, it requires burning through life, burning through complex structures. The behind-the-scenes of artificial light? Has always been ugly.

## Lessons of the Elders

Ronal is furious. “You allowed this?” she berates her sire. “You allowed him to bond with the outcast?” She’s breathing hard, on the boundary between reason and unreason. Tonowari is pissed and plosive, hardened and cruel; Tsireya flinches visibly and shirks back. “You disappoint me, daughter.” His lip curls, his stance is intimidating, his words are harsh in their economy; everything is designed for maximum punitive effect, and his daughter crumples before him, eyes large and teary.

The reason you ask your kids why they did something is precisely to avoid projecting onto them the worst possible motivations. Jake has even less of an excuse because aren’t they supposed to teach OODA loops in basic training? There’s that whole pesky “observing” stage before you orient and act; it’s the stage where you listen to the universe, ideally patiently and with an open mind, rather than berate it according to your preconceived notions. Soldiers who don’t pay attention to their environment get killed, and parents who don’t pay attention to their offspring...

Tonowari now turns to Lo’ak, who is brave enough to contest his account of reality—the nature of Payakan, the history of the tribe. Lo’ak’s parents are here to witness his courage, but it only reads to them as insolence; they feel their precarity, which makes them defensive, which makes them aggressive. There is a distraught look on their faces, as their youngest stands his ground. Tsireya just has her head bowed, staring at the ground, hoping if she fully submits she’ll make it out of this undamaged. “Payakan saved my life sir; you don’t know him.” There is a simultaneous subservience and assertion; it almost works. Lo’ak’s eyes are passionate, and apprehensive, even sad. He sets his face in stone against his elder, against the Father, the Patriarch of the tribe, the final authority on reality and norm, on the ways of his people and the world they live in. For a second, Tonowari seems to admire the stance, meets him in the eyes like a man, accepting its validity. But then Tsireya chimes in, her voice scared, timid, servile. Like one who has been hurt, who knows how bad it can get, who sees the power of the Father as final and impossible to challenge. She has been broken before; there is no hope of withstanding, in her mind. Her submission reminds Tonowari of his dominance. And now the clan chief’s finger rises, the sort of pointing index finger leveled at the chest that will provoke a bar brawl, and a contempt comes across his face. Lo’ak is disgusted, depressed, ashamed, but bows his head and kneels, still trying to show respect even as he refuses to cede ground. The rest of the kids, scared and apprehensive, not sure whether his

command is addressed to them, are slow to kneeling, and Tonowari snarls and points—"Sit down!"—and they scramble to obey.

Then the tone of the chieftain's voice shifts; the bad cop routine fades, and he becomes the wise old man, the educator, the teaching father. Tonowari is a *performer*; he has this careful control over the emotional valences of interaction, its push and pull. In another world, we might wish that he could sit down with Lo'ak, ask him what he has learned or heard or seen, and dwell on this new testimony. Evaluate it, and speak with Lo'ak one-on-one, away from others' eyes, as if he were a man. But we live in this world, and the inevitable compromises and failures of leadership, of mutual understanding, of misrecognition permeate Cameron's Pandoran Eden just as they do our own. Accommodation isn't on the menu, so assimilation will have to do. And Tonowari expertly guides the group into a re-annealing of shared narrative after its threat from Lo'ak's alternate account—its threat from outsiders (both Lo'ak and Payakan). And in doing so, he initiates Lo'ak into tribal lore, spreading the memes, communicating the party line, sure, but also giving a sort of rationale—both for why he condemns the bond, and why he has demonstrated such anger at its occurrence. He is providing an account for why his account must be defended.

His voice, at first, is almost threatening, carrying a sense of ancient danger and prophecy. "Hear my words boy. In the days of the first songs, Tulkun fought amongst themselves for territory—then for revenge. But they came to believe that killing, no matter how justified, only brings more killing." Blood feud. "So all killing was forbidden. This is the Tulkun way." Now some tautology: "Payakan is a killer, so he is outcast." His voice is gentle now, as if saddened by letting Lo'ak down with a reality check, with the Way Things Are™. Lo'ak, head still bowed, refuses this gambit even as his father glowers menacingly over his shoulder. "I'm sorry sir," he says, his head still partially bowed, regretful that he too must defend the reality he's experienced. "But you're wrong." Neytiri hisses: "Lo'ak! You are speaking to the Olo'eyktan." The clan leader, whose account cannot be contested; his word is law, and his law is the world. Sully Sr. can't stand for this; "That's enough!" he shouts, miming the authority of Tonowari, and it's effective enough that Lo'ak flinches, his ears folding back, his eyes once again downcast—just the way Tonowari put Tsireya in place. But Jake doesn't have the control or the leadership of Tonowari; where Lo'ak might respect Tonowari, while respectfully disagreeing, he cannot even respect his father, whose impotence is broadcast with every attempt at projecting power. Tsireya just shakes her head at him, saddened, like, "What did you expect?"

The attraction of the bad boy is in part the attraction of playing with fire—of risking increased entropy, and injecting novelty into the system. Destabilizing an equilibrium that’s grown boring, in the hope it re-anneals into something better, or at least something new. And make no mistake about it—Jake was a bad boy from Neytiri’s perspective, no matter how vanilla and normie he seems to us now. He was an outsider, an alien, a rebel with a cause—reckless, but brave. Union with him was something scandalous to Neytiri’s parents and tribe. And this is part of what attracts Tsireya to Lo’ak: he dares challenge her father, her cultural narrative, her reality; in doing so, he opens the possibility of Another World. Something that stretches beyond the borders of the world she’s known, both its literal geographic borders, and its also the borders of its social reality, those parts of the world which defy or go beyond Metkayina knowledge and narrative and rite. It’s the same thing that enchanted American GIs in the South Pacific, or that drew Aeryn Sun to Michael Crichton.

“I know what I know,” Lo’ak sings to Paul Simon’s tune. He’s surrendered his bid to change the mind of others, but he will not cede his own mind under any circumstances. Ronal growls and bares her teeth, frustrated and exasperated at this hard-headed boy, who will not go along with her family’s ways, even as she puts them up and feeds them, shelters them from the enemy. Jake gets up real close in Lo’ak’s face and growls into his ear in a tone usually reserved for death threats and the psychopaths of slashers. “That’s enough.” It’s a Batman voice, an ultimatum; it has a half-controlled, animal violence to it. Fear flashes across Tsireya’s face as she hears it, and she looks to Lo’ak, scared. “I’ll deal with this one,” Jake tells Tonowari—trying to show that he is control of his brood, that he still wields power, that he is a peer—but in a voice that suggests anything but. This is the opposite of “I see you”: the Other as something (a problem) to be Dealt With. All while Lo’ak gets his sulk on, his heart rebellious and his ideals disgusted. They don’t show it, but from the tone of voice—a tone we’ve heard in so many films before, from so many drunk, abusive fathers in wifebeaters—there will be now be several rounds of corporal punishment off-screen. Sully’s rage isn’t performed; he has nothing like the good humor and generosity that anchors Tonowari, even in the chieftain’s moments of anger—and that felt rage will flow through him, seeking an outlet, seeking catharsis, will flow through the violence of his instrument, onto whatever victim it can find.

Lo’ak and Tsireya go for a walk along the shore, in an almost forest-like grove of palm trees that feels like a meeting place between the Omaticaya and Metkayina peoples. In the backdrop, we can see the enormous, ribcage-like structure of the giant mangrove roots that scaffold the

Omatikaya dwellings. It's sunset, and an orange-purple-pink hue suffuses the entire scene, so we can't see the bruises on Lo'ak where his father gripped his arm too firmly, hauled him off or who knows what. "This storm will pass," Tsireya says wisely. She has a perspective, a wisdom beyond her years; she is gentle, and loving, and still open to what the world is, what it could be. They brush past ferns. "I saw something today. I saw a forest boy chosen by Tulkun." She's trying to find positive-sum ground, to emphasize the day's events in a way that skirts around Lo'ak and her father's conflict. But Lo'ak brushes her gesture aside; feeling that he has a sympathetic audience in front of him, he reiterates his account, the narrative he believes in and is fighting for. He is a warrior, for better and for worse. Tsireya's patient with him, and sad, but doesn't know what to do. She says, perhaps more wishing than believing, that Lo'ak's father will understand. But he won't, Lo'ak insists; he doesn't understand anything. "The whole clan hates me. Demon blood. Alien. That's all they see." He holds up his five fingers. His human hand, symbol of his Otherness. And she is wise enough to address the underlying emotional need, the askance, rather than continue contesting his account, rather than trying to troubleshoot or problem-solve. "I see you," she says, emphasizing each word distinctly, clasping his alien fingers. She looks into his eyes, and her own eyes get large, great big blue irises that are like infinite wells of understanding. "I. See. You. You are brother of Tulkun. You are one of us now."

## Mother-Hunt

Now we see the copters and SeaDragon, the great CetOps team as if arming for war, preparing their crab-like exoskeletons and their submarines. Their target is a mother and her calf. Not for their amrita, or their meat, but to serve as bait. To draw Jake out, into battle on the open seas. The captain—who has no interest in war, or anything that jeopardizes profits—tries to put a cheerful face on it: "Let's make some bank," he says, snapping his fingers, running around the decks issuing orders and motivating his men. He's not a bad leader either, really—just on the wrong side, a little barbaric and a bit too gleeful in his killing. They fire sonar depth charges, and you see the Tulkuns in the shallow waters, buffeted and bombarded by sound waves.

The captain's name is Scoresby, Mick Scoresby. And he's our emblem of capitalism. This guy scores! This guy racks up the points, the credits, the capital. Check it out, this guy accumulates! Guy puts on fat and muscle in equal glee. One of those strong men types, just likes getting biiig. Has a

vaguely Aussie accent but I have a terrible ear for that sorta thing so don't rely on it. Let's say he's a man from the provinces of the ex-British Empire.

Our scientist, Dr. Ian Garvin, breaks things down calmly for Miles, our outsider-as-audience-proxy. They target mothers because calves swim slowly, and the mothers refuse to abandon their calves. Meanwhile, the Tulkuns just flee, showing no aggression in response their hunting. Despite her great size, which could easily topple the hunters' boats, and drown the crew, the mother is helpless in part because she refuses to defend herself and her calf. It's a parable for a self-defeating pacifism. Payakan, Outcast, is unique in that he's willing to rise up, to meet violence with violence—and though it makes him an outsider, it will also save his spirit-brother, and his spirit-brother's people. That is still to come.

"Do they ever fight back?" the Colonel asks. Scoresby says he's never seen 'em lift a fin. If the pod fought back, all these boats would be capsized; the crew drowned; the pod safe. But no one protects the herd. The herd doesn't even protect itself. It just gives up. This is how you know they have culture: they have the strength of will and ideology to let themselves be taken. They're fanatical quasi-Buddhist quasi-Stoic creatures, and it's beautiful, and it's terrible, because soon they'll all be gone, and the only ones around to remember it are the Colonel and Scoresby and the killers that drove them to extinction. Dust. Just dust. You light yourself on fire and there's no one there to watch. Water. That's all that's left. The sacs of water that incubated all that complexity—punctured, lifewater spilled, depleted, spent. All the energy gone, all the wealth, all the ornament. Maybe, if you're very lucky, in small traces as a byproduct, you leave a transformation on the evil arm that slew you—another tempering, another softening, of the marine Colonel Miles.<sup>43</sup>

This sort of martyrdom is admirable, but also self-defeating; as a cultural or behavioral pattern, it dies out by definition, and cedes the field—hands over the universe, and all its treasures—to those who both least and most deserve it. To killers, aggressors, the less-enlightened. The reason the Tulkuns gave up on killing was because it was a bad pattern, a self-immolation, blood leading to more blood. But is this any less a self-immolation, any less a form of suicide? Might we propose an ethic of persistence, in which the long-term survival of any ethical pattern is a precondition of it *being* an ethical pattern? This always struck me as the issue with degrowth movements:

---

<sup>43</sup>See e.g. the pacifist school of the 50s Civil Rights movement: by remaining nonviolent, and becoming visible martyrs, one wins sympathy, makes clearer the right side and the wrong side. But this requires a broadcast medium, and a sympathetic audience large enough and powerful enough that their sympathies can change things.

any civilization that refuses degrowth, that continues its technological and economic expansion, will eventually outcompete or conquer those who have stagnated or regressed, in terms of sheer power, sheer capacity to harness energy. A gentle king whose twisted younger brother is poised to take the throne, should the king pass, must go to any length to ensure his own persistence as ruler, for to allow his death, or coup, or overthrow is to hand over power to a crueler regime. And this means, even, that he may have to make reprehensible compromises—might have to retract certain policies or leniencies, which threaten the security of his rule. This is a complex calculus, without correct answers—except that the most self-serving will-to-powers can never be ethical, and the most selfless ethic will never retain power, and so the answer is always somewhere in the middle,<sup>44</sup> being as generous as one can be without ceding ground in the game: finding win-wins which build political and economic strength while also uplifting and improving the lives of one's subjects; and the worst response is a disavowal of power, a disavowal of this calculus, a refusal to compromise, which is a preference for personal “purity”—for one's own conscience or reputation or immaculate self-concept—over the realpolitiks of life and death, liberty and suffering. This is what I mean by a persistence ethics. Once cannot go on protecting lambs from wolves unless one is also, to some extent, a wolf willing to do violence. To refuse this responsibility, and stay a lamb, is to sacrifice one's flock to the wolves; one may as well slaughter the flock oneself, as an act of mercy. And yet the eternal danger: that to overcome Monsters, one becomes a Monster. Come home from the war and slaughter your children, like Herakles. If growth and power are mandatory, then what kinds of non-exploitative, non-extractive, sustainable, non-rent-seeking, mutualistic systems of growth can we practice, that might succeed in a geopolitical system and even become an emulated model, a target of mimicry, on account of its success. Impotent states end up an eventual target of extraction by potent states.<sup>45</sup>

---

<sup>44</sup>The problem, of course, is that this evolutionary theory of ethics, over the long-term, obliterates our usual sense of ethic. The best algorithm for long-term survival will end up surviving, and so the ethical algorithm is equivalent to the survival algorithm, and all selflessness is really selfish.

<sup>45</sup>Some readers may have a problem with my always making the selfish argument, so let me address it head-on. From where I stand, the argument that must be made is always the selfish one, because a selfless cause consists only of cost, risk, and waste to the self-preserving organism. And all organisms, as products of evolution, are so inclined to self-preservation. If you can make a selfish argument—if you can explain why it benefits the target of your persuasions—it will always be more convincing, far more effective than asking for pity or charity. These are the basic principles of rhetoric. The economic

Scoresby, admiringly: “Tough bastards to kill though.” He laughs; this is sport. He and the Colonel get to overcome their positional rivalry, their structural antagonism that drives them into conflict, but now, in the shared joy of pursuit, the co-observation and co-triumphing of nature, the wind in their hair and the smell of the Pandoran sea, they bond; they are brothers.

Still, Quaritch doesn’t seem to be enjoying this quite as much as Mick; the latter’s crass glee stands in this stark contrast with the colossal dignity of the Tulkun, and some part of Quaritch—perhaps the warrior part, which admires organization and power, and respects its formidable foes; or perhaps the “Na’vi” part, this lab-grown recomb side of himself that Miles Jr. hopes to help bring out—some part of Quaritch seems grim, or saddened. Perhaps their pacifism, their refusal to fight, is disappointing. Perhaps he’s tired of schlepping around this planet bullying non-combatants. Because whatever you want to say about Quaritch, he gets his rocks off from the challenge of the fight, the thrill of real danger. He welcomes—longs for, derives his life’s meaning from—battle with a proper opponent. That’s why he felt disgust at the prospect of “wasting” a captive woman. That’s why he felt such strong

---

argument is there, because our games are carnivorous right now, not herbivorous, by which I mean most of us spend our days playing social games rather than extract resources. That’s because our non-resource-extraction productivity—the gains from coordination, and technology, and cultural expertise—way outstrip the immediate productivity of our resource extraction. A small percentage of the population can handle farming and mining and power; everyone else is off to the races. That means more people in the system aren’t “more mouths to feed” from some limited resource, like a watering hole, but are “more arms to build.” That means Malthusianism? Scarcity mindset? Is our enemy. The military and national security argument is not bad either, given how little history of domestic espionage we have, and how much we’ve benefited in our wars and military technology from foreign talent. And then there’s the argument of more bodies, more hands for the machines. It’s an ugly argument, perhaps, but that’s part of negotiating. You have to appeal to their interest, not yours. This is why Jake’s such a poor negotiator with the Metkayina, why Neytiri has to invoke sacred rite to get her kids shelter.

Similarly, it’s in the interest of “the machine” for there to be relatively little internal strife. Civil unrest is, classically, a bargaining tactic; the game theory of a labor strike goes, “I’m taking you down with me—how much am I worth?” It’s not so different than Neytiri, holding the knife to Miles’s chest.

I am not quite so jaded to believe, as Virginia Woolf writes, that “human beings have neither kindness, nor faith, nor charity beyond what serves to increase the pleasure of the moment. They hunt in packs. Their packs scour the desert and vanish screaming into the wilderness. They desert the fallen. They are plastered over with grimaces.” But I do believe that men pursue and fight for their values, whether those values are as base and biological as self-preservation, or as complex and culturally learned as religion. And that all persuasion must proceed on the basis of the Other’s values.

emotion towards Sully, a potent mix of scorn and disgust at the traitor, and a respect of his will, his fight, his determination. A proper foe, someone to set himself against, and match him, and test him. If only the real Sully lived up to the reputation: in reality, it was Neytiri who shot the arrows that pierced Quaritch's human heart. Another irony. When we reach the film's climax, it's Neytiri again who'll be his true rival.

Scoresby's face is serious now, remembering the gravity and difficulty of the task at hand. That's the gravity that gives it its thrill. "We go in from below, where there's gaps in the armor," Scoresby explains. Cut shots to the submarines. As the subs deploy underwater, we get the kind of cockpit shots and smalltalk you see in the original *Star Wars* trilogy—Han and Luke taking pot-shots at Tie Fighters, cracking jokes. Just two dudes bonding over the shared experience and overcoming of adversity. (Triumphantly, with a bang—a little pizzazz that shouts "Surplus!") Except instead of some regressive bro-down, Future Humankind has nice progressive gender norms—the guys and girls can go commando together, waste some innocent cow. Booyah! "3-6, you owe us a beer."

How do they take these enormous animals down? Airbags attached to harpoon, that slows it and drags it to the surface. Just the bare-bones algebra. A tool for puncturing. An envelope, an amniote seeking out more resources to prolong its own existence.

A tool for puncturing—a wedge, technically speaking, something that splits apart. Speartip? Wedge. Arrowhead? Wedge. Bullet? Wedge. Sword? Wedge. Hatchet? Wedge. Shovel? Wedge. Spoon? Wedge. Knife? Wedge. Fork? A set of tine-wedges. The only difference is if it's optimized for slashing or stabbing, i.e. shallow and wide, or deep and narrow. (Scissors? Two wedges. A toothy jaw? Just some fancy scissors.)

They're in these quasi-rigid inflatable boats adorned with gun turrets, called "Picadors," a bit like what the Coast Guard might pilot. Scoresby's in a life jacket that isn't buckled, and one of the pilots has Māori-style full-sleeve tattoos—their designs echoing the tattoos of the Metkayina, or the Tulkun—running up his arms. "She takes an explosive harpoon to the chest, but she keeps running. Beautiful." There's something almost redeemable about this mode of appreciation, something almost a shade of indigenous. The respect of admiring an adversary. The Captain can't help but gush to the Colonel, and the Colonel can't help but appreciate. He too acknowledges and worships power. "She takes an explosive harpoon to the chest, but she keeps running. Beautiful." Did I already give you the Buddhist monk schpiel? You hear a bit of Steve Irwin, a bit of David Attenborough—*Sir*

David Attenborough—when Scoresby talks. In *this* environment? In *this* economy?

Have you ever eavesdropped on *Avatar* chatter? On families at the movies or fans on forums? One thing I've noticed is how the sheer numeric scale of production—the size of the budget and the years of development—acts as a focusing point for awe, a surrogate idol, which draws and enamours audiences and helps secure a return on production through box office stats. (Whose news in turn drives further box office stats: audiences participating in the creation and amplification of history. It's one of the first things you read on the Wikipedia entries for blockbusters. It's always the triumphant climax of the behind-the-scenes docu—the lack of support or belief; the director's keeping of faith; the objective and unarguable mark of his victory.)

Some of the submarines have carcinized. (*Carcinization*: The tendency for organisms to evolve into crabs. As if a hard outer shell, pincer claws, and stalk eyes were common sense.) Just crabs in a bucket, preventing the ascendency of matter to ever-higher levels of complexity. The same ascendency that drove the Tower of Babel. That the Old Testament God, the embodiment of power, struck down because it was a threat to his existence. “Humanity comes together and builds this big central civilization to control everything. It’s fragile and hubristic. But once you do that, all the ambition in the system is towards differentiation, and the system fragments back down to some stability. God has a plan for this, so to speak.”<sup>46</sup> The mother’s eyes roll up in her head, as her calf tries to nestle against her, and the crew cheers; the crab subs, like ocean scavengers, scuttle atop her and insert bolts for trawling her home; the scientist and Miles stand silent: the scientist sad but resigned; Miles—his first time witnessing—disgusted.

The two get paired up because they’re both outsiders, and because they don’t fully approve of what’s going on. Same reason, structurally, that Jake was assigned to the science unit in the first *Avatar*, why Norm and Grace were the few humans to oppose the RDA’s actions.<sup>47</sup> There’s a standard narrative—the narrative of the crew’s cheers—which is advanced and maintained by the captain, and by the company that he works for, and the anthropocentric philosophy which backs all of them. In this narrative,

---

<sup>46</sup>Wolf Tivvy, *Palladium*.

<sup>47</sup>*TVTropes*, “Solder vs. Scientist” entry: “The Scientist wants to study and understand the unknown, or discovering/inventing something new, while the Military either tries to exploit it, or destroy it (out of fear of endangering the populace).” And: “In a First Contact scenario the scientist will most probably be the one who advises a peaceful, careful and thorough approach to meeting the aliens while the military man will offer nothing but varying degrees of Gunboat Diplomacy.”

the crew are heroically overcoming the forces of nature in order to reappropriate them for human consumption. A loss of a crewmember is a loss of a family member; a loss of a Tulkun is a victory celebration. This is the logic of belonging. Now we get Miles Jr., Miles Sr., and the scientist—two different father-surrogates and Jr. in the middle, ambivalent in his simultaneous rejection of these Western ways, and also intensely curious to learn his heritage, learn about the world, how all of it works.

It's like a Willy Wonka set meets a Star Wars dentist's office. The scientists are in hazmats. We hear the whirring of motors, a huge metal drill to penetrate the Tulkun's cortex. "These are highly intelligent being, probably smarter than us," grift-maxxer Garvin offers the assembled crowd. Wrong audience; no one present respects intelligence. They respect power. If intelligence contributes to power, it's useful. Otherwise, well—you end up like the whale. Scoresby, gleeful: "I'm the one with the harpoon." Jr., of course, cares—raised by scientists and also young, unhardened: able to be soft in ways that others are hard, curious about parts of the world others have long taken for granted. (In the sci-fi canon, an obvious comparison to Miles here is Luke Skywalker—*Star Wars* being a franchise Cameron has explicitly compared *Avatar* to.<sup>48</sup> Luke is raised by farmers but son of Vader. This is the Skywalkers on the Death Star, Luke outwardly resisting but maybe a little tempted by all this "dark side" business. This—and a whole bunch of other things—point to Miles Jr. maybe being a big deal in this series. He's already a big deal and he's still a kid, this is just the beginning of his story. Anyway:) Miles Jr., hung up on the "intelligence" part: "How do you know? That they're smarter than us?" "More neurons, more pathways." More connections; more parts and more integrations between them. More bridges. "Not only are they smarter, but also deeply emotional. More spiritual. This region here corresponds to our emotional centers but proportionally it's must larger. That's music, philosophy, mathematics, complex language." It's beautiful and sad, but Garvin's mistaken, and Scoresby, with his crude "I've got the harpoon," is right. It takes tools and technology to build up these traditions, and without complex niche-construction underway, it's unclear why they'd need any of these high-falutin traditions.

"Show me the money," Scoresby says, transfixed and Gollum-like in the glow of the liquid gold that now pours forth. Amrita, nectar of the gods. Immortality. Scoresby handwaves the explication: "This just happens to stop human aging, just like... stops it." But it doesn't "just happen." You have to sell your soul. That's what Garvin's all about. Scoresby, he knows

---

<sup>48</sup>Wormhole to "Force & Communication."

only numbers, purrs: “Ounce for ounce, the single most valuable substance known to man. This little vial here is worth like 80 million.” Like, yeah, totally dude. Imagine being so lower-class! You know what’s valuable? A humanities degree. Has he even read the classics?

“Amrita is what’s paying for everything here on Pandora now. Even your research, isn’t that right Dr. G?” “That’s why I drink,” Garvin replies, turning away into shadow. Miles is appalled they don’t use the whole body, *utens toto* style, because Na’vi were always shallow stand-ins for an idealization of North American indigenous peoples. Moving forward!

The whalers grift off & extract resources from the whales. The scientist grifts off & extracts resources from the whalers. Grifts in the interpreters and explainers and clarifiers on the rich possibilities of a primary text. Grifts in the cargocults, powered by the residual auras of a working original. Grifts in spinoff series and sucky sequels, grifts in the knock-off brands and generic cereal boxes.

This film has a bit of the institutional pessimism around science you get in, say, *Indiana Jones*—which despite all its orientalism can be coherently read as a critique of colonialism and of idol-robbing; see e.g. the way that Indie<sup>49</sup>—despite accusing his Nazi anthropologist counterpart of naïveté re: being used as a pawn by Germany—is similarly used by the American military. Rather than being studied or put in a museum, the Arc ends up in an anonymous military storage facility, perhaps alongside many similar great finds. These people’s only logic is power. You’re expecting too much, this appeal to aesthetics and spiritualism, knowledge for its own sake, the beauty of the past.

It’s also worth telling a short making-of story. After *Titanic*, back in the 90s, Cameron became obsessed with the natural world. He used his money to fund submarine voyages—exploring wrecks and deep-sea vents; filming documentaries that never turned a profit. Then he worked in indigenous activism for a while. The *Avatar* series is Cameron making a deal with the devil—Hollywood, to be precise—to symbiotically build a mega-popular franchise. What does Cameron really want? Probably to spend more time at the bottom of the sea, trying to discover new fish like a well-funded 17th century scientist-aristocrat. Probably to raise awareness about environmental and indigenous issues. *Avatar* is his personal grift on top of Hollywood’s corporate machinations, just like Garvin’s Tulkun research, and there’s no question in my mind that the film’s scientist is intentionally written in as a

---

<sup>49</sup>Wormhole to I.J. V discussion in Azores journal.

parallel to Cameron's own life.<sup>50</sup> Some dreams—most dreams—need money to fuel them, which means making a pact, a sacrifice, selling some part of your dream so the rest can survive. Artists compromise their art to fit funding and gallery opportunities, to sell work and make a living—all in the hope that some original part of themselves might live on within their work. It's the same lesson we've gotten in genetics: Not all of you will survive. Not all of you can survive. The paradox: in order to preserve yourself, you must change yourself, must sacrifice parts of yourself. Neanderthal DNA survives in the bloodlines of their conquerors. Fathers marry off daughters to foreign lands to maintain peace. Species adapt to changing conditions, just as we alter our own self-expressions to changing social scenes. This is the way of water.

Nor do we need to approach the way of water with such pessimism. Change is how we grow. Encounters with novelty, with otherness, with other worlds, is how we grow. Paradoxically, change is how we come into ourselves. Cameron: “When I think of what it was like for me in my formative teenage years, figuring out what the world was about, going to films and getting taken through that door way into another world, whether it was science fiction or the past or some other place, some other people... I think of what that meant to me at that time... that sense of almost religious transport... The thing that got me into filmmaking was a love of that sense of otherworldliness that a film can create in your mind. “ And one way enlightenment—Buddhist or otherwise—is sometimes described as as a switch from viewing the self as a single (approximate) state of being, to seeing the self as a process of state-change through time. The process which takes away our life is the same process which gave us life. One’s orientation becomes less the narcissistic “how do I frame the perfect picture?” and more “how to gracefully develop a song.” Self as a temporal orchestration of dust where survival never all-or-nothing: every part of the orchestration will and is already going extinct. And also every part will survive—will be seen again before the end of time, and be known.

But here, now, the process feels tragic. Waste—the one absolute evil in a world ruled by the inevitability of heat death. Not prolongation or economy but their opposite—a hastening of all our eventual demises. Now we see the mother-hunt’s aftermath, as the corpse floats out to sea. Ronal rides up on her ilu; the Tulkun had been her spirit sister. Her baby the one

---

<sup>50</sup> “I pitched [Titanic] to the studio as *Romeo & Juliet* on a ship... an epic romance... Secretly what I wanted to do was dive to the wreck of the Titanic, and that’s why I made the movie... I said we’ll be using it in the opening of the film... a great marketing hook, and I talked them into funding an expedition. “

she had earlier greeted. She cries in anguish. A woman behind us, in the IMAX theater, when I saw this for the first time, cried with her. Connected, through the neural link of film, of story. Ronal, anguished: “Her name is Ro’ā. She was my spirit sister. She was a composer of songs. Much revered; we would sing together. She waited many breeding cycles to have this calf. The clan was so happy for her. What is this, Tonwari?” She is broken, and then she bares her teeth and shrieks with rage, “What is this!”

There is a red tracking dart embedded in Ro’ā’s hide; it flashes once. Beacons. Tom McCarthy talks about how Western literature begins in “the regime of the signal”—with the great beacons, announcing the fall of Troy, at the *Oresteia*’s start. That trilogy is a trilogy about blood feud, about the way killing begets killing. About the way a system of magic—of methods for resolution—might break a historical pattern.

Quaritch and the Toruk Makto, bosom-foes: at war with each other, again and always until the end of time. Man becomes hero, history becomes legend. Hero becomes god, legend becomes myth.

## In the Wake

The Metkayina, war-whooping, assemble and prepare for retributive violence. Jake is given privileged place in the gathering, at its center alongside Tonowari and Ronal—though Tonowari stands on elevated ground—as the rest of the tribe crowds around them. “My spirit sister, and her baby, have been murdered by the sky people,” Ronal hisses, first looking at Jake, then towards her people. Tsireya lets out a sob; Kiri’s eyes seem scared. Neytiri’s too, but with grim resignation: more a foreknowledge, of hardship to come, than a tremor in the face of it. “The war has come to us!” Tonowari proclaims, the start of a pep-talk: the royal couple is a proper tag team: letting the narrative unfold at proper pace, setting the tone. Working their magic. The magic that made them leaders. The Metkayina warriors getting all riled up: sticking out their tongues and stamping their feet; swaying, clapping their forearms, snarling cat-like.

Jake tries to talk Tonowari down, persuade him—and the tribe—to flight instead of fight; but his voice is panicky; it lacks authority. The princes snarl, and look at him quizzically, like some foreigner whose ways and mannerisms they do not understand. A Toruk Makto shying from battle, shaking with fear? Jake is trying to pull the same narrative-voodoo on Tonowari that Tonowari tried on Lo’ak. Lay down a different narrative, advance one framing of the situation over another. But he’s overdoing it; he’s too insistent

and not enough assured; his body language is all wrong; it's like he's pleading but also insisting, a powerlessness and a desperation that persuade no one. Meanwhile Tonowari is standing wide-legged, broad-shouldered, feet planted, spear planted, squared up and jaw set; he commands the crowd, who loyalty was always his to begin with. A menacing, scarred enforcer figure stands nearby, face full of scorn and disgust.

Neteyam, first-born, acts as his father's hand, standing on his left flank, insisting to the crowd "Listen to him, listen to him." Sully: "You've gotta tell your Tulkun to leave. You've got to tell'em to go far away." He's almost angry now, gesticulating wildly. Angry at his own powerlessness. Angry at himself, for bringing this upon them, and at not being able to stop it. The anger makes him more impotent, a self-fulfilling prophecy. "If you attack, if you fight, then they will destroy you, they will destroy everything that you love. Hear my words!" Ronal instinctively puts her hand over her belly, protectively. But his words remain powerless.

Sully Sr. now seizes the red tracking harpoon from Neteyam, scampers up the woven tarp that elevates the royal couple, and claims the high ground for himself. He holds the harpoon over his head, invoking his right as Toruk Makto, and the crowd silences. He has never invoked this right before, and his parsimony with it gives it its power now; this choice use of a limited resource is itself a costly signal. But—in his first stroke of political competence we've seen this film—he finds a point of compromise, and peppers it with rhetoric: He has privileged information. He understands the Sky People; he knows how they work; and he demonstrates this by presenting his of the dart: that it is used to mark and track the Tulkun. If a Tulkun is marked, he will fly out and remove it. He understands that it is better to see half an agenda fulfilled than none of it. That is the meaning of survival.

## Three Brothers Rock

This is the logic of connection: Lo'ak feels compelled to chase after Payakan, his brother, and warn him about the ships. Neteyam and Tsireya feel compelled to chase after Lo'ak. Aonung feels compelled to follow after Tsireya, Rotxo after Aonung. Pretty soon it's all the cousins, but they arrive too late—Payakan's been tagged, and the Demon Ships of the Sky People are inbound on the horizon.

Lo'ak signals his father: "Dad—I mean, Devil Dog. Do you read me? It's Eagle Eye, do you copy?" We've seen this movie before. Back at the Shack. They're two clicks out, at Three Brothers Rock. The children bind

together, and their parents with them. This is the logic of connection: One leads to two, two leads to four, four leads to eight, soon the whole tribe's involved. This is how a Great War starts; it is beautiful, and it is terrible. Jake tells Tonowari, Tonowari sounds the alarm, and Ronal, despite being well into her third trimester, refuses to stay at home. They grab spears and javelins; Jake tucks hand-axes into the waist-belt of his thong, drapes a grenade belt over his shoulder, and yanks an automatic weapon out from under a woven bed-mat. Neytiri seizes her father's bow, clutches it in her hands, head bowed, communing with his spirit while Jake locks and loads. Now all the warriors of the great reef tribe dive from the decks and bridges of their marui pods, yipping for their skimwings.

The crab-subs of the S-76 get a two minute warning, and we see their pilots in their cockpits, dressed almost as if in motion capture suits, and we see how they control the crab-claws of the submarines with their fingers—like exoskeletons, like avatars. The extended mind, the extended body, the extended self—cyborg. Like riding a bike. From the bridge, Quaritch spots the Sully kids in his binoculars: the prize he's been seeking, through jungles and across the ocean. What he's been burning down villages to get.

As soon as the tracking dart's out, the kids scatter. Neteyam heads off the tracking subs by swimming away with the dart, dropping it in the nearby reef. The rest of the kids anxiously hide in the tall kelp, their eyes and heads darting around, as the submarines find them. It's a callback to Lo'ak's flight from the akula, when the Metkayina princes ditched him beyond the break. Except now they're all in it together, and the predator is Man.

Tuk slips from Kiri's grip, falling behind; Tsireya's ilu is hit by an air buoy, and dragged fin-first to the surface, before Lo'ak flashes by and grabs Tsireya's hand, pulling her onto his mount. The scattered cousins come up in the bladders of airbell kelp, gasping for breath, in temporary respite. Kiri, Aonung, and Rotxo come up in one air pocket, Tuk alone in another, joined by Lo'ak and then Tsireya. The light of a submarine headlight shines through the translucent membrane of the airbell, and they flee, just as the sub fires a net that envelops them—Lo'ak narrowly escaping, but Tsireya and Tuk caught in its weave. Down dive the Colonel and his skimwing, seizing the net in its talons, dragging it to the surface and into clear air. And Lo'ak, loyal to the end, dangles voluntarily from its tangles, hoping to cut it with his knife and free the captured girls.

They cuff all three kids to the rail, and Sully spots them through the scope of his rifle. He has an easy shot at the Colonel, but doesn't take it. "They got our kids," he says, and Tonowari and Ronal growl, but the anger and defiance break at the end, Ronal seems almost to gasp with fear, near

broken. And now we get to learn what this is all about. What it's always been about.

Quaritch, using the radio comms that Jake uses to communicate with his sons: "I took you under my wing, Jake. You betrayed me. You killed your own. Good men, good women. I will not hesitate to execute your kid." These cycles of blood are never-ending.

And for the first time in a long time, Jake shows courage. He looks around at the Metkayina war party, all the lives that will be lost. "You brought this upon us! You!" Ronal shouts, and Jake accepts this truth, swims out slowly on his ilu, leaving the pack.

From above, patrolling the skies, Neytiri looks down at their formation, at the lone ranger departing from the pack. "MaJake, what is happening? MaJake..." she says across the comms, and there is a terror in her voice. He thought he could do this, but it's so much harder now, having to hear her voice as she figures out what's happening.

This is the logic of connection: At the bottom of the sandy shallows, Payakan stares up at the shimmering surface of the water, sees the silhouette of Lo'ak, with a gun to his head, cuffed to the rail of the SeaDragon. And he loses it. His brow furrows, his eye squints defiant. A terrible groan comes from him, and he smashes into the reef around him, kicks up sand, works himself into a rage. And then he breaches. He swims straight out of the water, becomes airborne. And the full weight of his armored body crashes down atop the ship deck.

Only by giving himself up is the Toruk Makto saved. The Colonel is slammed backwards; exoskeletal amp-suits are smashed under his fins. There is an awed, scared-shitless look on Garvin's face, the kind of moment he's been waiting for, maybe even hoping for, but it's happening to him here now and he's collateral damage: the Tulkuns are fighting back.

## Collateral Damage

[The crew's] enchanted eyes [were] intent upon the whale, which from side to side strangely vibrating his predestinating head, sent a broad band of overspreading semicircular foam before him as he rushed. Retribution, swift vengeance, eternal malice were in his whole aspect, and spite of all that mortal man could do, the solid white buttress of his forehead smote the ship's starboard bow, till men and timbers reeled. Some fell flat upon their faces. Like dislodged trucks, the heads of the harpooneers aloft shook

on their bull-like necks. Through the breach, they heard the waters pour, as mountain torrents down a flume.<sup>51</sup>

By now the warparty is one great advancing wedge, Sully and Tonowari the tip of the spear. Skimwings dive and resurface as Neytiri plummets like a comet from the heavens with her avenging bow, piercing pilots' hearts, their rotorwings plummeting Icarus into waters. Tonowari and his steed now one creature, not even creature, one weapon, one fast-moving screaming spear that wedges in the hearts of whalers. The gator-like jaws of the skimwings crushing gunners' ribcages; a watercraft, exploding in flame.

We get some of the film's best shots—from inside the sub and copter cockpits—as the SeaDragon's crew is slaughtered. Do you remember how annoying Scoresby was, protesting the use of his vessel as bait? We see javelins and arrows pierce through the glass and into pilots' chests, as craft sink, or crash into outcroppings, their passengers flung from their hulls like ragdolls against the spinebreaking rocks. Neytiri is a goddess of death, unstoppable as she downs another SeaWasp, but now the Colonel comes for her, comes behind, lights up her flank with his bullets—stopped only by Sully himself, depleting the clip of his firearm.

Kiri, Rotxo, and Aonung, emerging from their kelp airbell, swim through the fingers of massive albino anemones, as a Mako submersible turns the corner, shining its great spotlight upon them, and Kiri connects her queue to one of the anemone's trunks. It lights up a fiery pink, and then the other anemones light up in turn, like a series of beacons, the whole network turning on, as Aonung and Neteyam watch, not fully sure what they're seeing. Kiri's face is a snarl of defiance; she guides her hand in a great ushering motion that causes the great tentacles of the anemone to seize and grip at the sub, driving it into the rocks. And we get another one of those interior cockpit shots, a reversal of perspectives, as the cockpit glass breaks, and the outside gets in—water rushing to fill the small cabin. “Breach!” the pilot screams, “Masks on!” And we seem him scrambling to get away from the flood, grunting and shouting as he can't quite manage to get his mask fixed on in time, the other crewmembers ejecting out towards the surface, but there's no mercy here; with another gesture of her hands, the tentacles grab at their bodies and hug them, kiss them drowning death. Aonung has lived in the reef his whole life, and heard the stories passed down by uncounted generations of ancestors, but he has never heard of anything like this. Kiri's face softens, is almost startled, as she looks into the eyes of her dead. *What*

---

<sup>51</sup> *Moby-Dick*.

*power is this? Have I, who loved all the living, become now a messenger of Death?*

On the bridge, Miles grabs a fire extinguisher and knocks out a crew member, smashing up the SeaDragon's controls and causing a turbine to burst into flame; the paramilitary guys rush in to restrain him but it's too late, the ship's steering into the rocks, and beaching like a whale. The hull punctures, as if harpooned; the compartments start flooding, as Tuk and Lo'ak and Tsireya, still cuffed to the deck rail, struggle to get free. Quaritch is elsewhere, no longer interested. He's in his own little world; the only other person who exists now is Sully.

Quaritch hovers above the ocean's surface on his skimwing, grazing the waters below with bullets, but Sully is a wild animal, teeth bared, and his steed rockets vertical from the depths, its teeth ripping open the throat of the Colonel's mount, which bucks its rider headfirst into sea. Nearby, Payakan has wrapped a harpoon cable around his horns, and is towing Scoresby's Matador—a sub-tender mounted with 50-cal Hydras; an proper armed-and-mobile command center—away from its support crews, as Garvey, seated in the passenger seat, heckles his old master: "Who's got the harpoon now?" The craft careens into rocks and starts flooding. Garvey's hysterical in the face of death, a beside-himself ambivalence. "Shut your cakehole," Scoresby snaps, before doing his best impersonation of Spielberg's Robert Muldoon: "Where are ya, cheeky bugger? Think you're pretty clever, dontcha." He is an Egomaniac Hunter. That's when Payakan breaches, wrapping the cable tightly around the watercraft, so it shatters the Matador's glass and shreds through its metal, trapping Scoresby's right arm. You see his bicep, adorned by a tattoo of a compass rose, swell up pink while he grimaces, and then Payakan gives one final yank and the arm severs, flying into the water, followed by its previous owner.

## Cadet Branch

The great gas giant begins to cover Pandora's star: eclipse has begun. The acting commander of the SeaDragon calls abandon ship, and Miles gets an armed escort to a lifeboat. Neteyam jumps atop the ship's deck and cuts loose the forgotten children, teasing Lo'ak as he goes. "Hey baby brother, need some help? Come on, say it, who/s the mighty warrior? " But he doesn't wait for an answer. Tsireya and Tuk dive for the water once free; after slicing Lo'ak's cuffs, Neteyam goes to follow, but Lo'ak darts off, grabbing the machine gun off a fallen recomb. "They've got Spider. We've

gotta get him. Come on,” Lo’ak says. Just like with Payakan. Isn’t the Marine motto “Never leave a Marine behind?” Neteyam just shakes his head but he can’t say no, so he just growls and raises his gaze, looking up at his brother, smiling. They wait in the ship rafters as the evacuation proceeds, and when Miles Jr.’s alone with his escort, they drop like cats of prey, knocking the guards out. Miles rips off one of the escort’s oxygen masks, exploiting that human vulnerability which Miles knows too well. The vulnerability that connects them. That divides them. One guard, temporarily stunned, manages to get a weapon up and Lo’ak guns him down with an uncontrolled spray of bullets, gun bouncing wild from the recoil. Lo’ak looks stunned for a split-second. It’s the first time he’s killed someone. And then the moment’s over and the cousins are sprinting off, some of the recombs spotting and firing after them, and Neteyam, the responsible big brother, laying down suppressing fire.

When they dive into the water, and surface at a protected distance, Lo’ak lets out a relieved laugh and war-whoop. “Bro! That was insane, cuz!” But as Neteyam joins them, it’s clear something’s wrong. He’s slow in the water, almost lethargic, and his head is barely above surface. “I’m shot,” he says, and Lo’ak’s eyes go wide with terror. We see the blood, blooming in the seawater. The way of water.

Meanwhile, Tuk has been grabbed while trying to save Kiri, repeating “Sully’s stick together” for a mantra right up to the point when she’s caught. The Colonel picks her up, slings her under his arm, as another recomb handles Kiri; “We can still get this done,” Quaritch tells his right-hand bitch, and she gives a “Hell yeah” in response.

The world grows shadowy and dark as they splay Neteyam’s body atop Tsireya’s ilu and search for help. Only a wafer-thin crescent of light remains uncovered by the gas giant’s shadow. Eclipse is upon us, and the firstborn of the Toruk Makto is dying.

When Jake finds them, the boy’s breath is ragged, choking gasping. He is barely conscious as they drag him onto the rocks. He rolls his son over, inspecting his back, sees the wound shot clear through the chest, knows instantly what it signifies.

The same scene, over and over again. The child, splayed out on the ilu under a sunless sky. And the wounded son, battle-bleeding, his fate uncertain.

Neytiri spots them from the air, swoops down, dismounts, runs over with a panic-stricken look, not yet comprehending. Jake has the heavy eyelids of death-rites, comforting Neteyam, holding him, speaking reassuringly. When Neytiri first sees her son up close, she’s taken aback; her mouth opens, there

is a simultaneous flaring and deadening of her eyes. She keeps opening her mouth as if to say something, then closing it. Even her ears alternate, between shrinking back and approaching. The part which wishes to speak to, touch, approach sees her son. The part which recoils sees her son dying.

Neteyam puts on a brave face, but a small part of him breaks, as he learns of his fate through the faces of his parents. "I want to go home," he stammers out, a kid again. "I know, I know," says Jake, as Neytiri's heart silently breaks, her ears fall, her entire expression shell-shocked with grief and pain. "We're going home," Jake says, and his voice breaks as he says it, hand on his boy's cheek, supporting his head. They lock eyes. "Dad, I," and then the light leaves his eyes and he sinks against the stone. There is a silence I took to be the sound of a flame put out, or the sound of a vanishing spirit. Lo'ak's hands still form a compress over his brother's wound. Tsireya's face is puffy with tears. Lo'ak's face has fallen, there is a hardness to it, as if it's starting to sink in. And all the meaning has evacuated Neytiri's gaze. As the light vanishes from her son's eyes it vanishes from her own, and then from the sky. Night has fallen. Flames lick the darkness.

Jake bows his head as his wife rises, "No, no, no," but there is no hope left in her voice, only despair. "Neteyam!" she screams, and then screams again, and screams again, inconsolable. "No, great Mother. No, great Mother!" Lo'ak looks down at the blood on his hands. It was his idea to go after Miles. It was his idea to go after Payakan. Looking out for the periphery, he sacrificed the center. In saving one brother, he's lost a second.

## Mother-Hunt, part 2

Sully stares off into space, a blank look on his face as his wife sobs over his son's body. A voice flickers onto his radio. This isn't over. "Can you hear me, Corporal? Yeah, I think you can. I got your daughters. Same deal as before. You for them. " All this comes through on Jake's earpiece, so he experiences it alone, watching his family around him, already so deep in grief, but not yet realizing the extent of their loss, their precarity. "Where are you sisters?" Jake asks Lo'ak—soft and slow at first, then shouting. "They're on the ship," Tsireya answers, like the truth is being drawn out of her, something she doesn't want to unspool. "They're at the moon pool. At the well deck, at midships. I'll take you, come on, come on," Miles urges. He's wonderfully brave, Miles. Arrogant and insecure, often obnoxious, but just wonderfully brave. There is no question mark in his brain about going back to the battle scene.

Meanwhile the Colonel's in Jake's earpiece, pulling rank. That's Quaritch's form of magic, framing a scene in terms of old hierarchies, half-forgotten by Sully but still dormant in some recessed memory. Not the clan chief; not the towering Toruk Makto; but a lowly Corporal, a grunt really, half-disabled. That's where Quaritch met Jake, so many years ago: in a wheelchair, put there by an anonymous war in the jungles of South America. Legs withered, just skin and bone, a half-person: living and seeing from a lower plane of elevation. "Talk to me Corporal, I need somethin' Jake or there's gonna be consequences." And Neytiri is still gone, not even present, beyond hearing. "Listen," Jake says to her, "Listen to me." She just screams. "They have our daughters," he says. And the sobs slowly abate, as she sucks at air, taking it in. "I need you to be strong," he says, "Strong heart. " And he puts his hand on her cheek, just like he did Neteyam.

Her pain has nowhere to go except channeled into violence. She connects her queue to her skimwing and flies off. Jake gets up to go after her, tells Lo'ak to tend his brother's corpse. "I want to go with you, Dad," Lo'ak says, but Jake dismisses him with a scornful glance, Miles in the backdrop like a favored son, waiting for him. "You've done enough," Jake says, and Lo'ak's face just collapses; he whimpers and his body bends over in pain.

The surviving marines and recomb form a perimeter around the ship deck, "Heads on a swivel, guys," behind turrets or kneeling with rifles pressed against their shoulders. Spider and Sully swim silent on his skimwing underwater, dismounting next to the ship, slowly surfacing, crawling onto its steel hull. Spider tells Jake where to go, and Jake tells Spider to stay behind. "Talk to me Corporal. This ship's going down and your girls with it. Your boy didn't have to die; you brought that upon yourself." Jake scurries over a ridge of scorched metal, looks down upon the moon pool from above. "You thought you could keep your family safe but you can't," Quaritch taunts and truth-tells.

Jake pulls the pin from a grenade, and tosses it down. There's a flash as fuel explodes and the ceiling starts to collapse, flaming debris falling meteor-like from the skies. Neytiri is a Hell's Angel, a berserking valkyrie, a wrathful Amazon. A blur of arrows and fallen bodies surround her. Quaritch tries to talk to his men via comms, but all the lines are going silent. These are his men, so reverse the speech: "Talk to me Colonel. This ship's going down and your men with it. Your guys didn't have to die; you brought that upon yourself."

One by one Neytiri snaps the necks of every human she comes across, as if in a frenzy, screaming with bloodlust and goring her enemies with a knife. Neytiri is a war goddess. Her eyes are wide and her gaze blank, as if

possessed, or in a trance. Spider—her son by upbringing—cowers behind a corner, terrified of being mistaken for the enemy. She starts screaming and keeps screaming, like an animal, alone and pained, her throat hoarse from it all, and then a new look comes across her face, like picking up a scent, a renewal of the hunt, and she darts off on all fours, her tail waving in the air, before she pauses and looks around her, and sadness comes across her face—not the sadness of Neteyam’s passing, which is deep with rage, but a new sort of shock, as if she is scared of herself: a shock at what has come over her, at what she is become.

One by one Quaritch loses his squad, la Familia. He depletes his last clip, pulls out a bowie knife to make his last stand. A soldier falls, slain, beside him; there’s a shocked, traumatic look on Quaritch’s face as he sees the yellow-green feathers of Neytiri’s arrow protruding from the trooper’s chest. She was always his true rival. “That’s right,” Kiri spits, her voice dripping with venomous hate and a half-contained hysteria. And Quaritch, half Na’vi now, just growls and bares his fangs. Even little Tuk hisses back, unafraid.

Watch Mama Sully in the wake of her eldest son’s death: Where does that energy, the feeling, the grief go? How is it enlisted, how is it spent? Revenge makes sense as a policy in a certain sense, like mutually assured destruction. Fuck with my child, I fuck up yours. You waste my lifewater; I have nothing left but to waste yours. It’s a deterrence policy. But once the deterrence has failed, it’s just fratricide.

Lynda K. Buntzen writes: The monster in *Alien* is “a primal mother defined solely by her devouring jaws and her prolific egg-production... What is so disturbing about this film from a feminist perspective is its extreme opposition of two kinds of maternal nurture: the instinctual and biological in the Alien, and the conscious, chosen, cultural motherhood of Ripley.” The adoption of a vulnerable party is cast as a redeeming, heroic act, while the violent protection of oneself—one’s biological DNA, as embodied in one’s biological child—is cast as villainous. Still, the two are more connected, more similar, than they are different; both motivated by bonding, by the survival of information through time. We can imagine that a movie from the alien’s perspective would have cast its characters the opposite way, with the violent, lead-slugging marines invading and decimating a mother colony. And this, of course, ties back into *Avatar*. We’re on the SeaDragon, and Neteyam is dead, and Neytiri is beside herself. And another film might show this moment from the Colonel’s perspective: trying to save Earth, to defeat the terrorist who threatens man’s future, and all his boys bleeding out on the deck around him. Oh heavy burden.

Jake finds his youngest daughter unguarded, and cuts her bonds. "Where's your sister?" he asks. "That way, that way," she says. Quaritch comes around the corner, Kiri held tight to him, his knife under her throat. This is his last card to play. He knows how bad his situation is but he bluffs confidence. "You're running out of time here, Corporal. Weapons down." And Jake's so broken he just mutely acquiesces, kicking his gun away. "Cuff yourself," Quaritch says, tossing a pair in front of his enemy. Spider runs out from hiding, shouting "Don't, stop!" And this is how you know he's a Sully; Sully's stick together, and disobey direct orders to stay on the sidelines. Watch now what he gets for his heroism.

In the shadows, Neytiri creeps like a cat. "Cuffs on now," Quaritch barks, and Jake slaps them on his left wrist, cursing. That's when Neytiri pounces—for a split second, you think she's going for Quaritch, but then you see her real target. Spider. "Miles."

She presses him tight against her, slides her knife under his throat. The Colonel startles, his eyes flashing. Jr. is confused but trusting, looking up without pain or anger at his surrogate mom as she hisses "Release." But his face darkens, as he fails to make eye contact with her, as he sees the look of pain across her face, begins to think maybe she isn't on his side. "What, you think I care about some kid?" Quaritch bluffs with his tough-guy act, but it isn't convincing. His magic is failing. "He's not mine. We're not even the same species." Spider is Good, so he bargains desperately for Kiri's life instead of his own. Maybe that's because he doesn't yet realize how serious Neytiri is. Maybe no one does, yet.

"Mom, don't kill him" Kiri pleads. "A son for a son," Neytiri hisses, and there is the sound of cold steel and death in her voice, and it's then that Spider understands, and a look of horror and betrayal comes across his face. Neytiri doesn't even look at him. She hasn't, and she won't. Miles Sr.? Is starting to realize too. His eyes and ears signal surrender, even as he refrains from speech. And Neytiri gashes Spider's chest, just skin-deep now, but he cries out in pain. She just bares her teeth, still not looking, never looking, even when she slashes the knife. The opposite of "I see you": subject as object; Kant's imperative. "I cut" she says, almost cooing, as if intoxicated by blood, as if craving blood. Beyond reason. A yellow shiplight blinks across the Colonel and his prize. There is a final shriek of pain from Neytiri, her eyes in agony at the sacrifice she is about to make, and the events which have led her to this place, and she flashes the dagger high above her head, preparing for down-thrust.

## Brothersport

The Colonel shatters. He throws Kiri to the ground, defeated. There's a confused, scared look on his face, as if he can't understand where this choice came from, as if he has suddenly learned something about himself which he never knew, or had long forgotten. Neytiri relaxes her grasp, but slowly. And then Quaritch recomposes himself, his knife held above his head, a defensive stance that's becoming increasingly aggressive. The rest of the family backs into the water, in retreat.

"But you're not leaving, are you Jake? Knowing I'm out there, Knowing I'll never stop," he taunts and growls. "I'm coming for you and when I do, I'll kill your whole family." Neytiri should gun him down now, in anti-climax, but she doesn't. Perhaps she understands that her husband must do this thing himself, to get his pride back. Jake's kids call for him from the water, but he isn't listening. "Let's get it over with, then," he growls. And lunges.

Purple plumes of gasoline ignite in a ring around the SeaDragon, and the family, cut off, returns to the ship. Kiri and Spider race across the upper deck as it tilts and begins sinking obliquely into the sea, while Jake and Miles Sr. begin their dance to the death. Into the belly of the beast, like Jonah and the Whale. Oh brother ye have sinned; now will ye face the music. Settling this thing that can never be settled. It's almost ceremonial: their combat not so much pragmatic as a matter of honor. Water rushes into an open hatch, and Tuk is sucked down into it, into the bowels of the ship, and Neytiri is gone in a flash, diving after her. They're unharmed, trapped on a lower deck, but water is rushing in, filling the tunnel, and Neytiri struggles to open a hatch as they're rocked and carried by waves, and the ship turns belly up.

## The Sinking of the Titanic

"Why does nature vie with itself? The land contend with the sea? Is there an avenging power in nature? Not one power but two?"<sup>52</sup>

There are only a few feet of air left below deck, mother and daughter hunting desperately for an escape route, Quaritch chuckling demonic as his duel with Jake goes underwater. "Oh Great Mother, help us!" Neytiri

---

<sup>52</sup>Malick, *The Thin Red Line*.

cries, while in another sunken compartment, Quaritch, teeth bared, has his legs wrapped in a chokehold around Sully's neck. This is how bosomfoe-bloodfeud ends: with everyone dead. The SeaDragon crashes onto the sea floor, a ripple of disruption, and the equilibrium changes; Jake kicks free, manages in the chaos to get Quaritch in a half-nelson. Switching back and forth, they mirror each other, brothers. Quaritch's eyelids close, and his facial muscles relax, then his fists. Sully keeps squeezing and squeezing, and then lets go, pushes the limp body into murky depths to die—watches it, as it sinks. Finally, it is over. Then he swims up to a grill where light shines through the darkness, banging on it, trying to tear it free, searches desperate for another opening, or something to open the grill. He's running out of air.

Above, on the surface, Kiri and Spider float, face-down, peering into the depths, looking for a sign of their parents. Lo'ak swims up on his ilu; "Mom and dad are down there, in the ship," Kiri says, and Lo'ak dives, Kiri and Spider hitching a ride into sunken ship, Tsireya's voice surfacing from memory, running through their minds: "Imagine a flickering flame. You must slow down your heart rate."

Miles swims through the darkness with his flashlight, past the anonymous drowned. He's looking for Jake, and thinks he sees him, the body of a recomb resting on the sand, but it's Quaritch, his chest seizing epileptic. Now we see Lo'ak, finding his own unconscious father, pulling him up towards the light. Miles grunts, frustrated, and turn, swimming away from the lab-grown body that holds his father's memories. And then he stops, turns, looks back. At the man who saved him. Who gave up his ultimate prize—Sully—to spare his life. All this time, capturing Jake was Sr.'s orienting star, his *raison d'être*. But it turns out there was something even higher.

Lo'ak pulls Jake into an air pocket, and Jake comes to. "Neteyam? " are his first words upon regaining consciousness. "It's Lo'ak, Dad. I'm sorry, Dad." "Just focus," grunts Jake, "just focus on now." Down below, Miles Jr. pulls the inflation tab on his life jacket, rocketing towards the surface with Miles Sr.'s seizing body pulled behind him. The air pocket's running out; they have to get ready to go; but Jake doesn't think he can make it. He's panting, exhausted, and in pain. "You know your way out."

The last electric lights start flickering out in Tuk and Neytiri's tunnel. Like the sky going black, without stars. Their faces glow with constellations. "Mama," Tuk wimpers, "I'm scared." It's Neytiri's turn now, to carry her child through the transition to death. She must invoke the same rites of reassurance, the impossible optimism that becomes a metaphysics. "It's all

right,” she says. “Stay close to me.” “We’re going home,” Jake said. There is only total darkness now, and a swirl of stars which soon, too, will go out.

## Fiat Lux

Kiri, perched atop the sunken hull in the angelwings of a gill mantle, like Luhrmann’s Juliet, summons swarms of glowing, golden, squid-like invertebrates—which move like starlings—and diverge like a branching tree—and unite in confluence, like runoff to a river. She swims with them, her whole body pulsing with blue starlight.

In the air-pocket, Lo’ak is trying to put belief back into his defeated father. *Respirare. Inspirare.* “You just have to slow your heart down. Be real calm. Breathe from here.” He catches his father’s eye, and his father suddenly Sees him, maybe for the first time, and too late, and there a surprised, calm look across his face, a trust he’s unable to justify. He has learned something about himself, or become something new, or both. The spiraling lights on Lo’ak’s forehead are a third eye. He invokes the Metkayina rite. “The way of water has no beginning and no end. The sea is around you and in you.” Between each phrase, a great breath. “The sea gives, and the sea takes. Water connects all things.” Another breath. “Life to death; darkness to light.”

At first, Tuk sees only a dim, indistinct glow; then the starling-squid; then her sister. Kiri’s gill mantle fairy wings help her breath, a jellyfish symbiote that swaps Na’vi oxygen for respired CO<sub>2</sub>. When she arrives in the air pocket, she hands the mantle to her adopted mother. Thematically, these moments are about parents, coming to rely upon children. But they also nod at the plasticity of children, the way the Omaticaya kids have all adapted and grown and learned the ways of the Metkayina, swimming alongside them, keeping up—where their parents are too annealed, or too stubborn and prideful, to do the same. Neytiri’s on the verge of an anxious meltdown and Jake seems too scared to try and save himself, and you have to wonder why they’re so shook, and if it’s about Neteyam. Heroes, in these movies, always get the friendly bounce, the superstar whistle. They may come from tragic origin stories, but when it comes to the everyday trenches of protecting justice and stopping crime, they’re invincible; they have plot armor. And now, they’ve lost the thing they love most in this world, and it shakes them to their core. And lest you think this doesn’t apply to you or your life, banish the thought. Because all of us have had moments when fate strikes us down so strongly we struggle just to stand, where some tail risk we can

usually handwave off visits like a plague upon our house. We wonder how we had ever been so casual, so light and unburdened. There is a moment where we realize we—not abstractly, contemplating the inevitability of time—but viscerally, through near-death encounters, are mortal. Or where we lose the thing most precious to us, because we weren't strong enough to save it, and sometimes it takes years of depressed collapse before we regain the faith to pick up the crusade against—the flag, the faith.

The ship's air pockets are rapidly dwindling. "Last breath," Lo'ak says—then they're under. "Follow me," Kiri says—the flowing organic river of gold invertebrates, the tentacles of each individual making up the great tentacles of a feeling probing spreading organism, as it makes its way through the spaces between structure, through the sunken, upside-down wreck of the West, and all those ugly metal grilles and rectangular hatches, past the floating body of a crewman, past yellow "hazard" paint and RDA-stamped gas cannisters and the whalers' mess halls, the strewn litter of milk cartons and whip-cream aerosols and aluminum beer cans.

Father and son escape through the opened flaps of the sub bay, the hangar-like undercarriage of the SeaDragon, from which the submersibles hung and dropped like bombs, but are now pried open and wrecked and ghostly. The wreck of the Titanic. They frog-kick upward but Jake's chest begins to seize again; he's out of air. And then out, of nowhere, a great fin. This is the logic of connection. Lo'ak, after Jake; Payakan, after Lo'ak. Payakan, his back glowing with a galaxy of stars, dives to meet them. The skypeople have robbed him of one of his fins, but he still has this one, to rescue his brother. He tows them to the surface, his great horns cresting first, water and air ejecting from his blowhole. Jake, coming to, watches his son speak to Payakan, watches the great whale roar and blink friendship in response, and he scoots closer to his youngest. He never listened but now he's been made to listen, and finally he hears. There are great gashes across his face, a split lip, bruised cheekbones. Beaten, defeated, his mortality proven, reminded of his own fallibility, the worst thing that could possibly could happen to him has happened, and he's humbled and open to the Universe's signs. He puts his hand on his Lo'ak's face, the same way he did Neteyam, the same way he did Neytiri. "I see you," he says. "I see you."

The sisters swim over with Neytiri. She's still devastated; she throws herself over her husband's shoulder, despondent. But she is also relieved, and she gives into that relief, her chest shuddering—gives into the chance for catharsis amidst tragedy, the shadow that will never be fully forgot. The sun begins to peek behind the great gas giant, Polyphemus. The Cyclops. The one-eyed giant. Son of Poseidon. The eclipse is over. The light returns.

Some hundred yards off, Spider—naked, except for a loincloth and a yellow life vest—grips Quaritch by the neck of his tactical vest, drags him up onto a rocky outcropping, where the Colonel gasps for air, kneeling and panting, looking up at Miles, who stands there, panting in turn, his posture defiant but unwilling to go. Blood streaks from slashes on Quaritch's cheeks and arms, the same as Sully's. Brothers in rivalry; brothers in war. His nose is bleeding; there's a large gash over the flying eagle tattoo on his bicep, a wound on the emblem of his Marinedom. His dog tags are tucked behind his vest. Quaritch's skimwing swoops in, screeching, an echo of Payakan's greeting rumble; Miles Jr. sheds his vest, again Na'vi. "Let's move out," the Colonel gasps, still a soldier, as he struggles to stand and climb atop his mount. Miles stands there, ambivalent. Quaritch takes a different approach, a truer one perhaps: there's a look of hurt on his face. "Son?" Miles just looks to the horizon, back at the smoke and the flames that rise behind his father, a reminder of all the devastation that father has caused. Quaritch's face is ugly, now; the bruised eye and the bloodied nose look menacing, there's something approaching anger in his eyes. He extends his hand, like Vader to Luke in *Empire Strikes Back*, on the relay catwalk over a reactor shaft. A small piece of land over chasm. Above the abyss. The light of the flames reflects in Jr.'s mask, and his face takes on an almost heavenly light, and he hisses in the Na'vi way, and dives off the rocks, and disappears into water.

He swims away from the reincarnation of his biological father, and towards the Sullys. "Monkey boy," Kiri says, announcing him, relieved. She puts her hand to his chest, smiles deep into his eyes, and they share a moment. He went back for her—nearly died for her, in more ways than one. "You alright?" Jake asks, and pulls him close. Neytiri still can't look at him, she just sits there, weeping over her bio-boy's body. But Jake, finally, steps into his role as bridgebuilder, pulls Miles and Lo'ak together, under his arms, and growls. "A son for a son."

## Communion: The Tree of Life

Neytiri's voice sings for the death of Neteyam as she fingers her rosary beads, back home, in the Metkayina village. Music is the god channel, spirit manifesting in ever-changing form: splitting, blending, varying, consolidating. One theme is extinguished; another emerges from the silence and empty space. Spirit vying with itself—strife and life and death all means of prolonging the story.

The voice of the father: “Every songcord must have a last beat.” What is a music? A sequence of tones which fit together—pleasingly, emergently. What is a chord? A chorus of notes, stacked atop each other, making something greater than their whole.

Every chord, every ringing of a bell comes to a close, and in the silence to follow, a new harmony may come to the fore—notes that, played earlier, could only cause dissonance.

Sully’s perched on his skimwing, towing a leaf-raft which wraps and supports the body of his eldest son, tucked in a fetal position, as if in the womb, as if ready to be birthed. “A father protects; that’s what gives him meaning.” His face is scarring with the still-tender traumas of battle. All around him, bioluminescence glows in the reef, and the Metkayina stand in a wide ring in the shallows, watching this family of outsiders, who they have come to know as their own blood, bury their inheritance, bury their hopes and fortunes, all the dreams they had for this eldest, all the time and teachings, put to rest now, lost to the waters. Purple pedals float around his body, some spilling out in a trail behind the raft as it’s towed, over a great golden meadow of polyps. The meadow lights the surface with its reflection, so that the surface becomes a heavenly sky, a sunset and a new dawn. Miles is there, back in the fold, with blue streaks of paint and dye on his human skin, clutching hands with Kiri. Neytiri is there with her veil, trying to stay strong, failing to hold back her tears. You see her face collapse, all the composure buckling. Jake is a mask of stoicism, he takes a few deep breaths and dives down with the body, escorting his eldest into a golden grasp that envelops him in light. “The people say that all energy is only borrowed, and one day you have to give it back. Eywa holds all her children in her heart. Nothing is ever lost. “

A military drum-roll of a snare as the Toruk Makto steps down the gangways like Braveheart. “My family and I, we’ll move on tomorrow, far away from here.” Tonowari, clan chief of the Metkayina: “Your son lies with our ancestors. You are Metkayina now.” He extends a webbed hand. “We are sea people now,” Sully narrates. “This is our home.” This is their family. We see Payakan circling the Spirit Tree, Lo’ak on his fin, as Jake and Neytiri, husband and wife, perform a morning ritual, tuning in to the spirit tree, dropping through the wormhole of memory, their queues’ tendrils fusing with the feathery tendrils of the planetary neural net.

Jake is standing beside a shallow pool, with a young Neteyam. His son has speared a fish—driven a wedge into its body—and is eager to show it off; Jake’s eyes tear up with pride and sorrow; Neytiri watches from the edge of the clearing.

Consider the fish which must be designated expendable for the moral logic to work. *Oel ngati kameie, ma tsmukan, ulte ngaru seiyi irayo. Ngari hu Eywa salew tirea, tokx ‘i’awn slu Na’viyä hapxi.* I see you, brother, and I thank you. Your spirit will run with Eywa, while your body will remain and become part of the People.

The fish whose expendability reveals the actual, deeper moral logic which underlies the film. This fish twitching in Neteyam’s hand, an arrow through its side. Like Paz Socorro—Jr.’s mom, Sr.’s wife, Miles “Spider” Socorro’s namesake—who died of the Na’vi arrow. Like the speared fish which Lo’ak leaves twitching on the sea floor outside the reef, when abandoned by Ao-nung. Like Payakan the Tulkun, a harpoon wedged in his fin. All of these organisms exist in a food chain. Na’vi are not separate from the circles of life, nor are men, and the practices of resource extraction, of amrita-as-death-defier, of meat-as-death-defier, are the same.

The only way out of complicity is to let yourself starve. In the long run, technology<sup>53</sup> and coordination might banish violence from our world, but that is not the world we presently live in. To starve: To wither and disintegrate through sheer force of will.<sup>54</sup> To not reproduce; to leave behind no heirs.<sup>55</sup> Because sooner or later, you must plunder from structure—destroy and *de-structure*—to perpetuate your own survival. To keep entropy at bay internally, by accelerating it externally. My order for your disorder. Raiding the world to feed the factory inside the fortress.<sup>56</sup>

To be like cyanobacteria and live freely off sunlight, carbon dioxide, water. (Yet plants, too, compete for space, for turf, for sunlight, crowding and shading each other out, a kind of killing. And all gasses, all Earth-bound minerals limited.) (Yet in an ideal ecosystem: “The waste of one is the food of the other, and that’s how the ecosystem goes around. If we didn’t have

<sup>53</sup>Lord knows solar power is the closest we’ve gotten to an ethically uncomplicated power supply; and lab-grown meat may soon end factory farming.

<sup>54</sup>The Simone Weil option.

<sup>55</sup>The antinatalist, degrowth option.

<sup>56</sup>Maybe, just maybe, you rig up a system whereby you live off the waste products of another organism. Maybe, just maybe, rather than compete over those limited waste products, you grow the population of the waste-producer—but now you’re eating into the habitats of other species, so either (a) get off-planet and terraform Mars, or (b) figure out how to keep a stable population indefinitely, and create a perfect barrier between yourself and the rest of the world, because otherwise it’ll aggress the hell out of you, with violence, because nature is violent. The second option is implausible, and functionally a form of suicide; the first requires a million years of genocide, to develop adequate technology. But if there is any redemptive future for mankind, whereby it breaks out of these eternal cycles, and fully realizes its progressive vision of an expanding ethical circle, Peter Singer style, it will look something like this.

[that] we'd be drowning, as we are, in the urine- or feces-equivalent of the production."<sup>57)</sup>

Sometimes the destruction is accidental, or not even: sometimes we are not even aware, the worlds we are destroying are invisible to us, like the microscopic colonies we eradicate every time we wash our hands. The insects squashed on windshields, or crushed underfoot by children, playing on the lawn. Consider the shattering of a coral reef by the tails of the Tulkun. What we saw, in a moment's disposable CGI: the destruction of cities, of civilizations. Let us assume that Pandoran reefs are like Terran reefs: It took centuries for that reef to accumulate, to develop, evolve, complexify. Polyps worked for a thousand generations of symbiotic exchange and partnership to build the coral walls whose smashed parts now settle on the sea floor. Their reefs are oases of captured and kept energy for a thousand species. In an instant, obliterated, without a trace of sentiment.

In a deleted scene from the original *Avatar*, Jake addresses the camera from his wheelchair, back on Earth, while a giant of a man slaps a woman in a bar: "Let's get it straight up front: You want a fair deal? You're on the wrong planet. The strong prey on the weak; it's just the way things are." He joined the Marines, he says, "to be hammered on the anvil of life." To become hard through hardship. And Pandora, while perhaps different in degree, is no different in kind. The same way that Western and indigenous cultures, while perhaps different in degree, are no different in kind. Some tribes found novel forms of cooperative governance, inspiring the colonies' Constitution. Other tribes just ate and ate and ate, swallowed up everything around them, til their environments began to collapse from over-extraction,

---

<sup>57</sup>Lynn Margulis. Later on, in the aquarium at Dive 75, one fish shits, and another swims up to sniff it, hoping for a meal.

or their victims turned on them, in total war.<sup>58</sup>

Have you ever played Agar.io? You start out as a small blob, relatively quick and nimble. You can munch any blob smaller than you, and likewise, get munched by any blob larger. The goal is to grow and grow and grow until you're the largest blob on the map, at which point you can't really be consumed—just outcompeted. As you grow, your agility diminishes, but more importantly, you become a larger supply of calories, and therefore more worth pursuing. Big fish, meet bigger fish. The whole thing is a highly imperfect metaphor for natural selection and the logic of power, but it gives you a partial intuition for thinking about an entity like the Cameron's Marines (who are themselves typically paid for and serving on behalf of capital). Gobble or be gobbled. You amass resources and power so some other empire can't conquer you—but in the process of accumulating, you make enemies, unite the galaxy against you, and risk internal fracturing, governance and administration becoming increasingly complex with greater scale.<sup>59</sup>

---

<sup>58</sup>Substack, *Mr. & Mrs. Psmith*:

I used to have a Bulgarian coworker, and I asked him one day how things were going in Bulgaria. He replied in that morose Slavic way with a long, sad disquisition about how the Bulgarian race was in its twilight, their land was being colonized by others, their sons and daughters flying off to strange lands and mixing their blood with that of alien peoples. I felt awkward at this point, and stammered something about that being very sad, at which point he came alive and declared: “it is not sad, it is not special, it is the Way Of The World.” He then launched into a lecture about how the Bulgarians weren’t even native to their land, but had been bribed into moving there by the Byzantines who used them as a blunt instrument to exterminate some other unruly tribes that were causing them trouble. “History is all the same,” he concluded, “we invaded and took their land, and now others invade us and take our land, it is the Way Of The World.”

<sup>59</sup>A reader, Amanuel Sahilu, responds:

The identity between killer and killed, or hunter and hunted, is indeed the basis for the Mithraic cult, which, naturally, chose as its central image both the god and sacrificial bull emerging from the same stone. No surprise it became a popular cult for soldiers. But it also occurs to me that the themes in your penultimate chapter have much to do with this idea, that this basic identity (acknowledged or unacknowledged) between eater and eaten permeates life and nature. Acknowledgement of this identity doesn’t discourage participation or encourage avoidance. Instead, like those cultish soldiers of the Mediterranean, the insight keeps one’s hand at the Wheel of violence and dissolution, not dejected or depressed, but with a special animating sorrow, knowing This Is How Things Are (as that eloquent Bulgarian put it).

The brutal truth of Power, a truth which transcends all our contemporary racial and geo-politics, and had its way in the Americas long before Europeans arrived,<sup>60</sup> is that unless you develop or bind yourself to power, one day power will show up at your door,<sup>61</sup> and it will take your children and it will destroy all the intricate complex structure that you hold sacred be a cultural fabric or literal buildings, or the organisms you care about, and it will enslave or harness this structure in service of its own interests, processed which often involves an intermediate step of destracturing that structure for pure energy and elemental resources. Your diversity will be obliterated, and your culture extinguished; if you are lucky, a few mementos, a few customs of dress or speech or worship will survive in mutant form, appropriated by your conquerors. Here is what such a process may look like:

...capturing many Chanka leaders... [Inka Yupanki] skinned them in celebration... But first Inka Yupanki presented the captives to his father, so that Wiraqocha Inka could perform the victory ritual of wiping his feet on their bodies.

...[The Inkan Empire's] methods [of conquest and control] were audacious, brutal, and efficient: they removed entire populations from their homelands; shuttled them around the biggest road system on the planet, a mesh of stone-paved thoroughfares totaling as much as 25,000 miles... To monitor this cyclopean enterprise, the Inka developed a form of writing...

---

<sup>60</sup>Mr. & Mrs. Psmith:

...if by indigenous we mean “the minimally admixed descendants of the first humans to live in a place,” we can be pretty confident about the Polynesians, the Icelanders, and the British in Bermuda. Beyond that, probably also those Amazonian populations with substantial Population Y ancestry and some of the speakers of non-Pama–Nyungan languages in northern Australia? The African pygmies and Khoisan speakers of click languages who escaped the Bantu expansion have a decent claim, but given the wealth of hominin fossils in Africa it seems pretty likely that most of their ancestors displaced someone. Certainly many North American groups did; the “skraelings” whom the Norse encountered in Newfoundland were probably the Dorset, who within a few hundred years were completely replaced by the Thule culture, ancestors of the modern Inuit. (Ironically, the people who drove the Norse out of Vinland might have been better off if they’d stayed; they could hardly have done worse.)

<sup>61</sup>The great mistake of the Na’vi is failing to get off-world. Anything less is inevitable doom. The death of a star, the arrival of a meteor, a plague, or just E.T.s. The more ecosystems you spread to, the better your chances. The great sea must be sailed, the island left behind. A pathogen must, like rocket fuel, use the sneezes of its host to cross the vast distance of interpersonal space, and continue replicating.

... Upwards of hundreds of thousands of people were forcibly relocated and funneled into labor camps, given the special political designation of *mitmagkuna*, approximately translated to “foreigner.” To maintain control over this empire, “The death penalty was carried out in a variety of ways, including hanging by the feet, stoning, beating to death, or throwing the condemned off a cliff. The ultimate in capital punishment was inflicted for particularly heinous crimes such as treason or rebellion. The victim was thrown into an underground pit, called a *sankacancha*, containing pumas, bears, jaguars, or poisonous snakes” (McEwan, *The Incas: New Perspectives*). Nonviolent civil disobedience was often met by brutal state repression.<sup>62</sup>

The byproducts of this subjugation—writing; roads; a complex economy—we call progress. (Benjamin’s *Angelus Novus*.) The Inkans were eventually swallowed by a larger fish, and ravaged by contagions born of contact. But the Na’vi are not finished, and the differences between their biology and the skypeople’s spares them from the pandemics that wiped out indigenous America.

The meme that wins the set of games is the meme that wins the set of games. The loop that reproduces itself is the loop that persists and spreads. And the most base-aligned mesa-optimizer? Wins the tourney by definition. Power is the law of the universe over the longue durée. The *Alien* franchise understands this get-up: “You still don’t understand what you’re dealing with, do you? A perfect organism... I admire its purity. A survivor. Unclouded by conscience, remorse, or delusions of morality.”

And part of the perfect organism?<sup>63</sup> Is the capacity to work together. Just look at the Marines. Conflict and cooperation are not antagonistic concepts; they are inextricable, one in the service of the other. What brings warring families together is a new shared threat, a new enemy, a new Other. And the disappearance of this Other may—and often does, inevitable—bring with it new in-fighting, and intra-othering, another splitting of unity. Competition begets coordination. Violence begets peace. A packs of chimps assemble, drumming on treetrunks, signaling to males near that a hunt’s begun. On all fours, walking through the underbrush, they spot red colobus

---

<sup>62</sup>Charles Mann, *1491: New Revelations of the Americas Before Columbus*.

<sup>63</sup>A phrase used by the androids of *Alien*, to describe its xenomorph: which is perfect from the neo-Darwinist, conflict-forward perspective, but (insofar as it lacks any sophisticated forms of coordination) will ultimately be defeated by the radically sophisticated coordination capacities of *Homo sapiens*.

monkeys in the treetops above. A few form a perimeter, the rest flush up, up. Scaling the walls, the towers, as if up ropes and ladders—up into the trees they climb, spotting their ideal victim, the infants they will try to separate from mothers, devour limb by limb. The attackers are spotted. The ambush begins; pandemonium breaks out. In the aftermath, the tender flesh of lamb and veal enjoyed with leafy greens, the chimps will share their meat among allies and mates, exemplars of generosity and kindness. This is the logic of power, and of connection. War, as Robert Wright's *Nonzero: The Logic of Human Destiny* incessantly argues, is one of the great forces of cooperation. On Twitter, the libs are ooh'ing and ah'ing over nature's mutualism, deriving hope from inter-species symbiosis. But every example? Is born of conflict. Badger and coyote, hunting together: one runs the prey into its burrow; the other, digging, flushes it out. Shrimp clean parasites from the moray's mouth, as oxpecker's clean buffalo teeth, and Egyptian plovers the incisors of crocodiles. Boxer crabs wield anemones like weapons. Ants tend to their host acacias, attacking any herbivores which threatens it. Ravens lead wolves to their prey; the wolves, deconstructing tough hide, expose the entrails, left-overs for the birds.

It is Lo'ak's world now. The film reads, to me, as a paean to the way that younger children are born on the outside, are always in some way less central, more marginal than the primogenitor. The new, which brings its own logic: different from the Father-logic, embodied in the eldest. (The eldest imitates, a golden model; the youngest inverts, and differentiates, a "black sheep.") A logic that is often misunderstood, marginalized; maybe dad tries to stamp it out with his own notions. But the Father always dies in a sequel; that's what makes it a sequel. Behead and be beheaded, a Green Knight. There are cycles to these things. We cling to a present already past; temporal tides buffer us forward, indifferent to whether we drown. Indifferent to whether, when we wash up on shore, we're still in one piece. From the sea we are born; to the sea we return.

Jake Sully, Toruk Makto of the Metkayina, is finished running. "I see now. This is our home. This is our fortress. This is where we make our stand."

Life is a process of branching relatedness. To a given organism, some relatives in the tree of life will count more than others; many will count not at all. A few are worth everything and the farm. Family is a scandal because family is asymmetrical caring. Any notion of family implies a notion of not-family; inclusion implies exclusion.

Otherness radiates outward, through the boundaries from within—each outside layer Other to the layer deeper down. Other Cell, Same Organ;

Other Organ, Same Person; Other Person, Same Country; Other Country, Same Species; Other Species, Same Planet. Families: a kinship of form, a kinship of function, a kinship of form in the service of function. Show me a family, I'll show you a fortress. Show me love I will show you a violence that protects it. One hand grabs, one hand guards. India's castes—*castas*—is merely the Portuguese term for clan, a description of the tribal *jāti* and their enforcement of lineage, blood purity, and intermingling. Every biological family is built on an original hybrid blending—a miscegenation—between *pater* and *mater*, which in turn protects itself (a doomed project) from future miscegenation. Sex is dialectic, dialogos, a merging of models. Sex is hybridity. Sex makes “survival,” in any more-than-temporary way, a farce: persistence can only be accomplished by radical compromise, a half-life of one generation. If sex is survival, survival is suicide.<sup>64</sup> Carbon-14? Immortal by contrast. But it's the only sort of survival we've got.

Jake Sully, Toruk Makto of the Metkayina, opens his eyes. The orchestra swells.

---

<sup>64</sup> *Sex-slain. Sex as suicide.* There is an established, cross-cultural tradition of linking sex and death. Stanislav Grof: "Sex also has important transpersonal dimensions: on the one hand, it is a vehicle for transcending the biological mortality of the individual by leading to new birth. On the other it has deep connections with death. The French actually call sexual orgasm 'small death'..."