

From Lion's Head to Muizenberg

*Susan Forde**

Travel away from home for research is often stressful and emotional, and draining. I imagine anyone reading this who has this experience will know this in some way. Life is often stressful and emotional, and draining. I imagine anyone reading this will know this in some way. In both, I try to appreciate movement. Not running from issues or anxieties but rather taking them with you, assessing their importance and letting the wind or the waves carry them where they need to go. Recently, I misplaced something precious to me, and I fell for a story spun of golden sunsets and dewy mornings from a dubious seller, but I also have found calm that only comes from accepting the ebb, the transitional nature of everything, the flow of constant change.

As I climb Lion's Head, Doreen Massey's writing about Skiddaw in the Lake District is one of hundreds of brief-micro thoughts (I shouldn't have fallen for that story again, I should have listened, I need to reply to that email, what am I chasing, I need to arrange that meeting, what am I looking for, I have no idea) that cross my mind. I notice the changes on Lion's Head from hike to hike, the disturbed rocks, those a little slicker, a little dustier, tufts of foliage trodden. Massey says that mountain ranges are one of the seemingly static things in the world but are actually incredibly mobile¹ and if we speed up time, we would see them edging across the world, crumbling and elevating. Over the course of our relatively short lifetimes these places will change. On the face of it, not very much, but movement is consistent. I've used Massey's metaphor in conference presentations comparing it to post-conflict spaces, but I'm not in a conference hall now and as the path gets steeper my focus returns to the trail.

There are parts of Lion's Head that I feel like I know so well and parts of it that I meet with fresh appreciation, there are rocks that have moved and move from hike to hike, day after every other day. There are the new arrows the SAN Parks team have painted on smooth slabs to direct foot traffic up and down the mountain. There are boulders that have fallen and shrubbery that retains a charcoal exterior from recent wildfires.

As I climb higher, I leave more thoughts behind, as my heart thumps against the elevation to quicken the delivery of oxygen to my limbs, there's a back and forth.

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¹ Massey, D (2005) for space. SAGE: London. p.131

you lost,

I lost nothing,

you lost then and you lost now,
peace.

I lost nothing I gained

I gained peace, I gained peace.

My hand picks a hold, it is slightly craggy, the quartz glints, there's a moment of nothing as I swing my leg up and pull my body higher, scanning for the next hold. Massey is right, of course mountains change, and they move over time, people's feet criss-cross them, and we shape the form of life and mountains with our movement and care for the space.

But when you're climbing, the issues that dominate your attention on the horizontal slip away like the sun in the last few moments of a sunset. My body is flooded with serotonin, my eyes focused on the rocks, both the ones I touch and the vista that stretches out before me jagged and smooth as the table-cloth cloud billows down the mountain. The improbability of it confounds me, I am here, now. The trail is a space of loss and losing myself, my thoughts leave, making room for feeling more how I am instead of who I am in this space.

I've been up Lion's Head in very thick mist that drenched my hair so much it dripped like I had stepped out of the shower and I've been up Lion's Head in the blazing midday heat, with the sun beating down turning my skin a pink hue, sun cream dripping off in sweat. Both suboptimal conditions. But climbing Lion's Head soothes me, it feels like a cooperative endeavour in the scramble, finding the perfect foot and hand holds I reach for and move higher and higher. When I'm near the top and struggling to catch my breath nothing else could matter, just finding the next hold and moving upwards. I try not to stop on the last stretch that looms, my thighs, and calves burn, like my lungs, but I know if I stopped, my legs would languish a little more. Here I lose the narrative of who I am.

There are four key parts of the Lion's Head where I shake my thoughts, lose my anxieties that pose as me, and in these places, I am present. The beginning is a long steep slope, you pass people heading down who are smiling because they are near the end, you pass people stopping to take pictures of the view. This is consistent throughout the hike. And the absorption makes sense because the view is a conglomeration of water, earth, and air, the waves sloshing below are soft and foamy trimming crumbs of the earth, and you can't help but try to record it because it honestly is unfathomable, and you feel small facing it all. Of course, it's better to feel small on a mountain than in a city, the latter can be uncomfortable while the former somehow is liberating. The trail brings space not cluttered with walls, cars, stops and starts, not hostage to the sequential flows of the city, you are at the direction of your own feet and hands, you are the flow. In this first section you might get orange dust on your ankles or calves.

The second and third sections can only be experienced if you take the long way around, as opposed to the chains and clips, there's an intersection in the route where, you can basically climb straight up or skirt around Lion's Head. The second section runs straight along the side of the mountain that faces Devils Peak and the cable way of Table Mountain. The slight respite in the incline gives your legs a break and as a result feels like a dance along the side of the mountain, the path is narrow but two-way, which sometimes requires creative footwork. There are two small rocks that form a V, you can put your hands on either side and swing

your legs through. You'll probably bump a knee or scrape your leg if you're moving fast along this section.

After this there's a short steep scramble and you find yourself on a plateau that adds to the knobbly peak of the head. From here you can see people further up heading up the final ascent, but also you can see across the Lion's Head, the plateau itself is scattered with bunched shrubbery and stepping stones, flora and fauna, a springing mane of the peak.

Just after this portion you'll pass a couple trees, their roots are exposed from the criss-crossing feet, the wood smoothed, and sometimes slick as a result of this repeat flow. The last section is the final ascent, when you have a good rhythm, it feels like you and Lion's Head, you're collaborating, you're working together on this climb, the mountain face becomes an axis off which your body is propelled faster, higher, in some ways it takes the weight off your feet and the view lightens my body. It's a spatially disembodied experience, things feel fluid and limbs that felt heavy and weighted in the initial slope move responsively with the natural holds. Again, leg scrapes likely depending on how graceful/or fast you are moving. Hands will get dusty and dirty by this point. Climbing Lion's Head, I can only look and focus on the route, focus on the collaboration between hand and stone, it centres me and creates a space of concentration, hands and feet, upwards, breathing. Sometimes stopping for water on a hot day. Resuming, hands and feet, upwards, breathing.

The water lapping on the bay below is beckoning in refreshing swirls ebbing at the rocks. Across the peninsula at Muizenberg, the beach is soft and sandy, famous colourful beach huts punctuate the coast, tourists and locals, young and old, from different backgrounds, and different spaces across Cape Town are moving in their own rhythms. I've always loved and felt comfortable in water, but surfing transformed how I see myself and life, how I understand home. There are some really central things that surfing teaches you, which might seem rudimentary but are essentially good to remind yourself of in, and out, of the water.

Firstly, balance is important, you can't catch a wave if you don't have balance, you will fall off the board if you don't have balance. Balance isn't about looking around at what other people are doing, it's about being aware of yourself, your needs and moving in a way that supports that. Secondly, not every wave is for you, but there'll always be other waves, there'll always be other opportunities, and there's a thrill to be had in watching others' successes, you can't catch every wave, but everyone can catch a wave. Third, the ocean is powerful, things that are powerful can carry you far, they can also knock you off balance and spin you around. It's good to not underestimate the potential of something powerful to knock you off your intended course, so that's where we come back to balance. It also teaches you the value and the importance of getting back up and trying again.

Through these lessons you learn to focus on yourself a bit more, take losses easier, accept sudden changes, and to keep trying, keep going. More than anything, you appreciate the impact of small movements, and though it is of course, a relationship that ends and starts pretty quickly, there's a timelessness in the moment you catch a wave.

Waves can travel thousands of miles and, among other effects, end up lapping at your toes, carry you gracefully across the beach, or knock you face first into your board. The latter is really humbling. But also, funny in retrospect, as long as you can get back on the board and your nose isn't too sore. In one wipe out, the leash wrapped around both my ankles. I began

to panic, the first thought was to reach to untangle them, but the location of my ankles was not a static point anymore, struggling would use up more oxygen and I was likely to float up pretty quickly. Then there was a kind of calm I didn't know I would be able to experience being tumbled underwater with my ankles tied, this all took less than a few seconds, I think. It was a reminder that things can happen you don't expect and sometimes not reacting is better than jumping to action.

I fell off a lot at first and likely will fall off more when I get back in the water, I don't really remember the moments when I fell, they became empty spaces, autopilot was in control. Before the wave, your mind is fully centred on the water and those around you, you're watching, gauging the swell, watching for other surfers, watching for the swimmers jumping waves, and the beginners in the shallower waters. Watching as a swell-breaks and ripples along, the wind spraying a mist, and if I start paddling now, I'll catch it. Now you are absolutely nowhere and yet completely present, like being propelled up the mountain, the water lifts you forward, and the feeling of the swell under your board feels enormous and fierce, you become part of it, outside of time. It's not like walking down the road in the centre of Cape Town, where you are all too conscious of your body, the phone, and money in your pocket, wondering if you look like a tourist, thoughts bouncing back and forth. In the city, the improbability of my presence, the contribution I have to make, I question.

I'm not an expert, not in this field in which I've spent the past thirteen years of my life and devote endless time to, not an expert at surfing, or swimming, hiking or climbing, but I'm an skilled in feeling how those spaces affect me. It feels like the ocean is moving with you and you with it, and the mountain is responding to you and you to it, as you lose and regain your balance, as you find the hold.

Catching a wave, nothing else exists, it feels like you're moving faster than ever before and it's timeless. The power behind you is humbling, but also exhilarating. You're connected to something much bigger and much more powerful than yourself and as this wave hits you get to glide along in company as it crashes in to froth. I am home when the wave lifts my board, I feel embraced when I find my footing. Movements are instinctive, and the separation between you, the board, and the wave blurs, all that's before you is rolling blue and then there's a cormorant bobbing in the water, and you're both a bit startled.

When I leave Muizenberg and Lions Head, I stare hard at the outlines of the mountains, of the coast, I am looking to burn them into my memory so I can remember how they make me feel, afraid I won't see them for a while, won't feel at home for a while. Their silhouettes are timeless to me, moving fast up the trail and on rippling swells, moving to and from Cape Town but of course, they move thousands of times before I see them again. Yet when I return there will be a moment of negotiation, a moment of coexistence through these unending transformations, there is no 'eternity of the hills' only 'a here-and-now'.²

In these moments of sweat dripping in my eyes, and saltwater filling my nose, of seamless movement, and racing swells, I feel outside of time, in collaboration with elements carved over millennia, pulled to-and-fro by the moon. In between Lion's Head and Muizenberg, I find myself moving back and forth between mountain and ocean, spaces where I lose my

² Ibid. p. 141

thoughts, feel more and think less, where nothing else matters but a mediation of experience with sea, and stone. It is a negotiation of movement, on and in these spaces, a rock can provide traction or be slippery depending how I put my foot on it. In the water, balance is found through movement from the soles of my feet to the top of my head. And in these moments of traction, of balance, connected to the transient, and unfixed, that swells and crashes and lifts me, carries me, racing to the shore, here I am home.