

How To Address the Ancestors of the Land

by Miri Mertner

It all starts with the right name. Names are everything, especially the name that people have chosen for themselves at the end of their life, the name that encapsulates who they truly are. This is the name that you must use when you wish to enter their land, and only a true descendant of the ancestors of the land can give it.

How to find them? Well, it's easy enough, once you get there. They will be holding signs with the name of the land you wish to visit – all the famous sites are there – and as long as you can point to the place you want to see on a map, they will help you find the right person. Your translator will help you; we have calibrated it to the language spoken in this region.

Of course, there is more to it than the name. Usually, you will need to memorise some elaborate set of words in a language you will struggle to pronounce. But they are rather forgiving with the pronunciation part of things, as long as they are satisfied with your effort. This part will be spoken in an archaic form of the language only used for such rituals; your translator will not help you here.

Oh, and beware of the scammers. Next to the people holding signs who are the *real* descendants of the ancestors of the land, there will be five or six people holding signs who only *claim* to be such. The real

descendant is usually the one holding the sign with the fewest exclamation marks.

Good luck on your journey.

I listened to this message with trepidation, frowning at the holographic woman as she spoke. Sure, I had wanted to see the natural beauty of the Earth so many of us had left behind all those years ago; but not like this. Not with the names of ancestors in strange languages and signs and scammers. I sighed and blinked twice, saving the message to my back-up memory just in case.

I donned my UV suit and left. The light fabric felt silky against my skin, wicking sweat from my body so efficiently that I barely had time to feel it at all. The heat was bearing down stronger than at any other time of day; it was why I had set out now, so that I might bypass the majority of the crowd that was sure to visit the same site later. It was a rite of passage of sorts for my kind to visit Earth once in our youth, though it was going out of fashion; my grandfather had been in this same place nine-hundred years ago. Most of my friends had never been and did not intend to go, too afraid of the ageing effects of the sunlight on their skin.

Ancient buildings stood tall and derelict all around me. A few of them had been preserved and turned into hotels for people like me, complete with more primitive versions of temperature control and food synthesisers.

Excitement started to coarse through my veins as I entered the hovercraft that greeted me on an old,

pockmarked street. I was going to see the world; *really* see it. This was the place my own distant ancestors had evolved; this was where I wanted to die, too, in a thousand years or so. Fortunately, my family had more than enough money for an authentic Earth-burial for all of us, on a plot of land close to here which my great-grandfather had bought many years ago.

I instructed my suit to keep the *ambient sound: off*. That way, I would only hear it when people talked.

We zoomed away into the open sky.

Dusty buildings turned into dusty desert with ease. I stared out of the window at the expanse, and spotted the commotion that the message had warned me about; but it was far smaller than I had imagined. A small group of people, all dressed in more fallible versions of my own UV suit, were talking to the famed sign-holders, no doubt negotiating an appropriate price for their family secrets.

I landed towards the front of the line. Silence fell momentarily; everyone seemed to be watching me step out of the hovercraft. I smiled nervously at the closest ones shamelessly ogling my body through the suit, which I suddenly wished was a little less sheer. Perhaps it was still an Earthen tradition to wear something underneath these kinds of suits.

I turned on my translator and looked at the four signs half-heartedly held in the air. Where were all the rest? I squinted to focus in on one of them. To my surprise, the letters did not morph immediately into perfectly

understandable English; the dreaded exclamation marks were the only symbol I could recognise. I beelined for the only sign with none.

A bored-looking man with leathery dark skin and more wrinkles than I'd ever seen in my life was just barely holding his exclamation-mark-free sign upright with one hand, an umbrella in the other. Seeing me approach, he started talking – and my translator, instead of transforming his words into ones I could understand, only seemed able to feed me a lonely word here and there in a stream of sounds punctuated by what I can only describe as *percussion*. The consonants of this language – if that is what they were – sounded like the varied sounds made by a drum-synthesiser, some deep and resonant, some short and sharp.

'Hello,' I tried tentatively, wondering if the output would be as garbled as what I could hear.

Alien – not – grandmother –

I looked around, wondering if I was the only person with this problem. I clearly wasn't; it seemed that the exchanges I had thought were negotiations were, in fact, frustrated dialogues between modern people and their own translators, while the locals yawned and spoke their own language.

Eventually, I found a language we could both speak: money. I handed him all the physical wealth that I had, the paper tokens I'd never needed to use before, and he accepted. I had no idea how much I ended up paying, or how much it was worth in Earthen terms.

He did not share his umbrella with me as we walked. I had prepared for this: I was on hydration pills and energy pills, and yet the heat alone was enough to make me feel tired. I slogged on behind the man for what seemed like an eternity – enough time for the sun to shift significantly in the sky – until, finally, we arrived. I spotted a row of *real*, living, breathing trees. And behind those trees – the man beckoned me into them with an outstretched hand, while I hesitated, unsure if the trees might harm me if I touched them – there was a huge pool of water. Ten times bigger than any swimming pool I'd ever seen, and bluer than I'd thought possible.

I stared at it, transfixed, and reached for the surface of the pool, but the man closed his fist around my wrist firmly. I remembered, then, about the name.

Kli'omma, the man began. I imitated the sound in the middle of the word as best I could, drawing it out from the depths of my throat. *Anni'oa...*

His words mingled with the words of another small group of tourists a little way off from us. This didn't make it any easier to remember the unfamiliar sounds. I repeated each word slowly, but whatever I did, the sounds leaving my lips remained stubbornly different from those he had uttered.

The group close to us was struggling, too. Eventually, they gave up. Some sort of negotiation seemed to take place; their voices rose until I could hear every word with ease, but their guide stood tall, guarding the

place of his ancestors from their anger. A small smile played on his lips, like a trick.

Was this how these trips typically ended? I wondered. Would mine end the same way?

I turned on my translator in the vain hope that it would help me.

To my astonishment, his words morphed almost seamlessly into my own language.

Dearest grandmother, (Anni'oa), who now resides in this (blank) as a spirit; I come to you with a visitor who wishes to see your magnificence; I apologise that you do not know this person, but I assure you they come to you in good spirits and with all the respect that you are due.

I checked my translator's notes for the unknown word: it gave me the word *water*. *Back when humans did not distinguish between hydration-water and swimming-water, they drank the same liquid they would swim in*, it explained. I felt a momentary flash of revulsion, but this abated quickly as I looked back at the awe-inspiring landscape in front of me.

I repeated the words, inserting the unfamiliar one into the blank space.

The man regarded me solemnly for a moment, and then, finally, extended his hand towards the pool, his palm open: an invitation.

I hesitated. Was it safe? But he was watching me expectantly, a twinkle in his eye as though daring me to defy all that I'd been taught. The blue *water* looked so inviting under the sun. All my mother's warnings dissolved in its depths.

I jumped in, suit and all. I had no idea I would feel such an array of temperatures: the water was warm at the surface, while pockets of icy cold caressed my feet and waist. The man laughed. The sound was infectious; I laughed, too. I laughed at the strange algae that stuck to my suit, at my translator, the device that sat behind my ear like a parasite. I laughed at the fact that we came from a place of such beauty only for half of us to hole ourselves up in perpetually cold, age-slowng space stations, and for what?

The man had long since stopped laughing. My howls – of joy or despair, I no longer knew – floated lonely in the wind.

‘Take me to another place,’ I asked him, hoping he would understand me through the translator. ‘Please.’ I showed him my pop-up map which marked plot my great-grandfather had bought so long ago. I knew we must be close, but I had no idea how to get there. My companion squinted at the map as if it were, broadly speaking, uninteresting to him. Then, his eyes widened, and he pointed to the logo of our company – the company my great-grandfather had founded. Looking back at me, he made a single, clicking sound that I took to mean *yes*.

The wetness of my suit cooled me as we walked. I noticed the man had filled a bottle with the swimming-water and was sipping it contentedly. I suppressed a wave of disgust.

In the distance, I saw the last thing I'd been expecting: buildings. They looked a little like the ancient ones, and yet these were rounder and fatter, as if they were relaxing on the ground rather than standing upright and stiff. As we came closer, I saw that they had also been constructed out of a different kind of material.

I heard the voices before I saw their owners. Laughter, and clicking sounds, and animated speech with a musical quality to it greeted me as we neared the buildings. Was *this* our burial ground?

My heart sank.

A woman, naked from the bottom up but for a decorated shawl around her shoulders, ran towards my companion and greeted him with an elaborate series of hand movements. She saw me only after this ritual was complete, and frowned deeply, turning back to my guide and speaking rapidly. He answered, though what he told her about me I do not know. She eyed me warily as we neared the place that I was now certain was a village or small town, and I knew from her stare that they did not usually bring visitors to their home. I wanted to tell her that I was just as confused as she was about why I had been brought here.

I drew in a breath and focused on walking. The roads were not exactly paved the way the ancients used to, but they were flattened; all kinds of wheeled contraptions raced up and down them. I wondered why the man hadn't used one of them to bring us to the lake and back.

My guide stopped and turned to me, indicating the village, his palms facing the sky. Then, he pointed to the wristband from which my map had emerged: we had arrived. But if he had taken me to the right place, there should be a plot of land that belonged to *us*, yet it was full of people. I opened my mouth to speak, but no sound came. Behind me, I could hear my companions talking.

The woman cleared her throat and turned to me.

I know a little of our ancient language, she said. *I know more words than other people*. Her eyes flickered to my guide. *Can you understand me?*

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘How did you learn? I thought my translator was up to date – how come you all speak a different language now?’

She laughed. *Your people do not* – she indicated the man, and the wrinkles on his face, which he promptly turned into a broad grin – *but we do. We die, new people are born, we build new things. Our languages changed.*

‘Right – you still *age*.’

Yes, she said, smiling.

‘Can you ask your friend – ’ I pointed to my guide – ‘why he brought me here?’

She switched back to their own language and I heard only: *grandfather – place – daughter* –

But then her eyes widened. She addressed me again.

Your ancestor was the first?

‘Yes.’

She gasped. I was used to this; everyone knew about my great-grandfather, the first person to settle in space. He had also been, at the time, the wealthiest human being alive. He'd bought huge swathes of land here before leaving, but never visited again. Though we all came back with stories of how the Earth had changed since he left – how it was safe, now, at least with the protections offered by our privilege – he was unable or unwilling to believe it. In his mind's eye, the Earth would always be part wasteland, part warzone. Or maybe he just preferred the cool interior of a spaceship to the heat of the Earth's sun.

Look, the woman said, bringing my attention back to the present. I never had been the best in my class at *Mind & Presence*, letting myself daydream far too often. But she only smiled at me before pointing at the sky. No, not at the sky; as I zoomed in, I could just make out the body of what seemed to be a spaceship in the distance, towering over the rest of the buildings in the town. Its massive metal body was camouflaged by a thin layer of dust, only just allowing the familiar logo of our company to peek through.

We see it in the stars, she said. *We see it on the ground. There are stories – that this land, a long time ago, belonged to the person whose name looks like that.*

The next word she said needed no translation. 'Jeff-rey,' she enunciated – carefully, slowly, but perfectly, as if she had practiced it many times before. My great-grandfather's first name. She pointed back to the logo and repeated it: 'Jeff-rey'.

‘What do the stories say?’ I asked.

She started speaking, stumbling a little over her words. *A long, long time ago, this land belonged to machines from above. These machines attacked anyone who came near, and drove away anyone who tried to settle. They were painted with the name of Jeffrey, and these paintings have been remembered by all those who came before me. One day, the machines allowed my ancestors – our ancestors – to approach. They were hungry, and thirsty, and inside the carcasses of the dead machines, they found shelter from the sun. There is water nearby, so they made these machines their home, until they started building. But we know that they may return. We know that Jeffrey is still alive.*

My head was spinning. In fact, the Jeffrey she was talking about would die soon, as everybody must, however slowly they manage to do so. How could I ever explain to her that he would expect to be buried here, not just on Earth, not just on the Original Continent, but right here, in their home? That their small town could be destroyed, if he willed it, in an instant?

I sank to the ground. My breathing, under perfect meditative control all my life, sped up until I struggled to swallow air through my suit. Had all the stories of my great-grandfather’s achievements been twisted to show him in a better light?

The woman stooped and gently unzipped the mask of my suit. A mess of smells overwhelmed me – something pungent and sour, something strong and spicy, many things so foreign I couldn’t describe them at all. My ears were overwhelmed with sounds that went in every

direction: high-pitched melodies that seemed to have no structure blended with a low buzz similar to the humming of machines. My sensors were struggling to keep up, uselessly trying to categorise and log everything new. I thought of the dreaded UV radiation that would be permeating my unprotected face now; I imagined wrinkles deepening on my skin, spreading across my body like a disease – I couldn't help but let out a strangled scream, all the emotions I'd been taught not to feel lest they cause stress, which causes free-radicals, which causes *ageing* – and yet here were these people, ageing with abandon, ageing and *happy about it*.

The man's face was lined with pity.

They brought me to their home. Children – *real* children – ran around the few rooms they all seemed to share. I'd taken calming pills by then, along with hydrators. My breathing was steady, as it had been all my life, and even though the sounds and smells overwhelmed me, I couldn't bring myself to close my suit.

We want to speak the name of your ancestors, the woman said meaningfully.

'You want – ' I looked into her hopeful dark eyes, lined at the edges in a permanent squint – 'to visit space?'

Yes. We have been waiting for a long time for a descendant of Jeffrey.

Was that why they stood for hours under the hot sun every day among the impostors pretending to be them? But –

‘Why?’

If we come with respect and speak the name of his ancestors, he will know that we belong. Down here and up there.

I thought of bringing the two of them there, suited up for the cryo-stations, showing them the stars that I’d grown up with. Maybe they would seem as amazing from the outside as their home did to us, with its huge pools of swimming-drinking-water and trees and some winged creatures I had learned long ago were called *birds*.

‘I will help you,’ I said.

I had no idea how I would manage it, or how I would break the news to my great-grandfather that his burial ground was now a bustling town full of children, smells, and swimming-water that was also drinking-water, and that I had brought two of its inhabitants with me. That now, after so many years of living on the land, they had returned to claim it for themselves. That even though they lived pitifully short lives compared to us, they had managed to remember how his machines had wronged people in the past.

‘It’s just Jeff, by the way,’ I added. ‘That’s what everyone called him.’

At least they would know how to address him by name, and perhaps that would appease him.

This story has been informed by a large body of work in evolutionary linguistics and anthropology. Hence I am only including the references below which directly inspired this particular work, or research that inspired some of the foundational ideas upon which this story is based. I hope you enjoy it.

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