

ALEXA ELDRED

Rocks

Even when they skip from human hands, rocks are always serious.
They keep time with each epoch, documenting every creep, crack, strain,
 fault-scarp, erosion, trench, shudder, shock,
And settling, refusing to let this planet forget its trauma.
When they are not architects, storytellers and historians,
rocks are the warm beds of reptiles;
The pursuit of alchemists, to turn one metal into another metal, the desperate
 ping against a window pane, lover to hope-to-be-lover. Rocks are crushed
Into roads, the ideal pets for negligent people, door stops,
Doors to caves. The first easels and books were cavern walls,
And our first fire lightning-lit, we the witnesses unable to forget that exchange
Of light, one for the other. Other times, rocks are most content
Tucked in the dark seam of a shoe; no invitation. Over-staying. Always.
Rubbing the wrong way, waiting it out.
Left foot. Right. No preference, it seems. Scratchy sock, riddled sock,

46 No sock. Feet sweat. No sweat. As if the rocks respect the feet for understanding
How hard the world can be. And if it gets too abrasive, pumice will buff away
The calluses. You know what they say: A new day,
 a new layer
Of skin to risk the elements. If only horses could manage as well to visiting rocks.
A stray stone wedged into hoof bruises the tender underneath.
Be it swampy field, river-wade, cliff-side, desert, snow, ice—horses can negotiate
Most topography. But one little rock is all it takes to overwhelm man's oldest traveler.

Earthworms are less anxious, able to swim around any rock in their route,
Boulder or pebble. Depending on the rock's size, it could take some time.
But the worms don't worry. Nor do they ever get lost, even when slipping between
The miscellaneous architectures of the dead. No wonder the worms' joy! With ten hearts,
They are capable of great love and acceptance. Unless they are shipwrecked
On a sidewalk after a rainstorm, squirming, or trying to squirm
With half their body irretrievably sole-smooshed
 into cement.

In which case they feel only heartbreak at the inability to duplicate
And make use of their bodies. If only some myths were true!
Occasional worm-melancholy aside, after rain happens to be the opportune moment

For listening. Just watch where you step before
 pressing your ear

To the ground. It will most likely smell of lawn clippings, boredom, and or dog
excrement, but commit. Be patient. Show a little wonder. For you may,
if you're as lucky as Crane, hear the worms singing
Through the layers
Of dark sediment.

Cows, on the other hand, do not concern themselves with a rock's paleontological,
Poetic, or divine potential. Nor do ostriches, pigeons, stingrays, crawfish, or crocodiles.

 They leave that to us.

While ambling through a field, said cow does not swallow said rock for its aesthetics
Or apparent rarity, but for its rockiness. The cruder and irregular the better.
The cow appreciates it merely for existing in its proximity, unlike a metal lawnmower,
Which only splutters, or smokes, or downright refuses to continue its labour
Upon ingestion. Chickens are also quite particular;
Quite delicate creatures, they prefer to gizzard a finer grind of gravel
Than attempt a pebble's immensity. The Plesiosaur was not as finicky,
And perhaps more precise. As it turns out, life is not only a matter of digestion,
 but also of buoyancy.

48 How many stones did its insides polish smooth in ancient Cretaceous oceans
Before it found its own bones engulfed in a chunk of Alabama,
Sea levels out of sight? And what if beaches, once massive boulders,
Took “shape” after a million migrant feet
ground them down to sand? Unlike Aruba’s pale dust,
This island’s shores are zillions of toe-crevice-sized fragments.
Regardless of quality, beaches deposit under nails, in any and all orifices,
Each gritty granule a memory to be found on the shower floor,
Or as a grey tub ring, an enamel tide-line,
Or while the towel dries the hair, or as incessant scratching
against washing machine drums,
Days, weeks following the seaside excursion. No matter how many tidal shrugs,
Not even the sea can rid itself of its grit.

When it comes to embodying our deities, rulers and beliefs, medium is everything.
Chocolate cake is perishable. Snow meltable. Sand kickoverable.
Clay erodible, brass corrodible. Sure, bronze is comparable to stone, but it’s pricey.
Rocks, on the contrary, are reasonable and everywhere, cut-cheap. Hopefully the gods viewed it not as
acts of stinginess, but rather of ingenuity.
Take the Giant Buddha of Leshan for example. It did not just surface

Out from that mountain precipice. And the queues of moai
That haunt the Easter Islands,
 bodies turned inland,
Those hulking heads in grass, first breaths of light and green.
In Colorado Springs, there's even a red rock "garden" worthy of other gods.
Though one must drive or horseback there. The desert Steamboat will get you
Nowhere. At best, a striking view of desolation.

Speaking of which, if you have anxiety or inadvertently kill every green thing you try to grow,
I recommend a Japanese rock garden—nothing like a dull, approachable little box
With white sand and burnished stones to mitigate your overactive mind's
 incessant, irrepressible, incapacitating tendency to fear-monger.
If one is feeling especially apprehensive, attempt to create a series of tracks
Through the gravel with the tiny wooden rake. Liberation can only be achieved
With a steady hand, exact lines, and an arrangement of the stones just so.
Think poetry. Only, instead of words, arrange rocks.

Before we used them to barricade our fires, our wells, our houses, our cities,
And our minds, we marked our graves
With rocks: stones organized in greater pattern

50 Or mounded into cairns. As we cobbled together language, we epigraphically inscribed
On tablets and walls. Even perilous mountains are littered
With little rock edifices to be heeded. Corpses were laid into sarcophagi and set
Into stone mausoleums. Pyramids were even erected above
If the bones were deserving enough, while other skeletons were stashed away
For safer keeping. Following the raiding of their graves, a wet landslide
twice-burying Tut's tomb, the valley looking after things. Dust swept
Under the cemented mud. Good luck looting the leftovers now,
Thieves. There will always be death and rocks.

As animals, we recall violence well, so it isn't surprising
That the golem we remember best
Was a stone servant turned berserker, born from a little water, a lot of earth,
And a rabbi's good intentions. Customarily, the word *Emet* was carved into their
foreheads; again, good Intentions. But the golems were always denied voices to speak
The truth with. Who could blame their subsequent madness? Truth weighs metric
Tons. How many unturned stones that remain so out of fear?
Sometimes, one's darkness is simply easier to stomach.
Consequently, every golem that came after awoke in this world enraged,
And was deactivated enraged. One would think that at some point, the priests would have learned

To make those things out of something less hard-wearing, dangerous,
Like *papier-mâché*. But it was always stone, or mud, and words.
They say golems are related to Adam. Imagine if obedience
ran in the mud.