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ROCKS

by

Dallin Law

Rocks rest black, volcanic, and half buried in reddish-brown sand. Heavy to lift and yet out of place, strangers just passing through. If I wanted, I could root them up, carry them away, moveable and mortal. I could roll them to the striated cliffs filling the horizon and introduce them. Ponderous witnesses to volcanic rubble once heaved out of magma, hurled out into this older, foreign, sandy place to cool.

Frail clusters of hermit grasses, miniature shrubs, tiny flowers, and stumpy trees huddle close to creeping rocks. The wind deflected by the cold, frozen mineral, the plants couched between gaps of stone. They shiver and cower with only rocky comfort. I am like these.

A cold convulsion. My hands are white and red with cold—scaly, alien. A warm creature growing cold, sitting on a frozen stone. Body's heat leaching from my shrunken buttocks, my presence is at best temporary, more likely meaningless.

There have been times when I felt old like the cliffs—perspective found standing still for a long time. I became aware of transient things. Bacteria in a petri dish—multiplying, dividing,

reproducing, growing at a rate difficult to conceptualize. Compared to the cliffs, I am small, but compared to the single-celled, I am a cliff. I'll eat yogurt like a cliff eats humans.

Of course, these are terms much too small, too embarrassingly short-sighted. I detach the cliffs from their place and time, bring them back to thoughtless origin. In silence they orbit a slowly gathering, heating pre-sun—dully throbbing red. I trace invisible filaments of gravity that connect all matter everywhere, loosely gathering dust clouds slowly swirling inward. A coming together. I watch as one cliff, after millions of years of circling, finally finds the other half of the canyon. Their matters mated, their energies expelled on one another, heating through a loving, violent attraction.

I lay my body down on the rock and place our two matters together. Carbon meets silicate. Re-creation of the sole creative movement, how life was born. We two floated together once as siblings, everything in common. The sun floats above me as it did then—ultimate, generous in emanations of heat born in entropic orgies of fire.

One day the sun's hydrogen core will all be burned into helium. Ravenous, the sun will metamorphosize into a larger, redder, angrier star relearning to consume itself from the inside out, an insatiable hunger ending with explosion. Explanation and origins for what I see. Suns, long since exploded, are what this rock is made of. I'm a star corpse walking, thinking thoughts my creators never did.

How long can I sit still—distancing, broadening—until I am subsumed in massive cycles and processes too big to see the smallest fraction of their revolution? Purposefully, I fill my lungs, pushing my ribs out and stretching my stomach, straining my navel

until I exhale. I make a fist, feeling the skin stretch over my knuckles cracking, drying, becoming ugly. I feel where my clothes drape over and cling to me as if I had shingles, acutely surprised. I shift my lower body by pushing against the rock with my hands, a shift to the right buttock; it's warmer.

I'm taking up the Zen Buddhist's project of awareness of things, the origin, connection and relation. I take up the secular geologists and astronomers' vision of the past in the transient surface of present. Cutting away superfluous, crowding, competing voices, I rediscover not myself, but instead, for a moment, the cyclic past and find myself temporary and blissfully empty. Realization comes suddenly, violently, and forcefully—an anticlimax.

The past has become hypnotic to me; I see it everywhere, in everything a bulky, turning wheel without holds. Like musty boxes of silken fabrics from my great grandmother's attic unearthed by curious nostalgia, the substructure of each folded bolt formed of thoughts, emotions, memories—each sensation woven on top of uncertain stories, hinted origins. The past has become both a source of quixotic enlightenment and an eternally reinterprettable symbol. It affirms my existence, showing I've lived, but proves too deep to safely plumb.

Out of habit, I reach for my knife and it feels familiar. A year ago I looked for a pocket knife. I started noticing more knives protruding out of pockets. Surgical, tactical, sterile and menacing knives. Precisely harmful for the pseudo-military paranoid. Other men wore woody knives with OLD TIMER etched on plastic woody cases, housing wide blades. I saw in them my dad as he carefully opened his knife to teach me how to clean a fish, where to

cut. Each knife was pregnant with past, with latent association. I needed something blank or at least uninterpretable, a *tabula rasa*.

Plain, my knife is constructed of three pieces. A round wooden cylinder for a handle. It feels oily smooth though it's dry. On one end a metal ring turns with pressure from my thumb. I turn it until the small slit in the metal aligns with the blade tucked inside the handle. The knife unfolds and I turn the locking ring again to keep the blade from folding in. The blade is thin, strong, and sharp. The mechanisms, the materials, the ideas of the knife are plain—understood and unadorned.

But I especially study the blade. High carbon steel, able to be honed to a razor sharpness, but a finicky metal prone to rust, staining, and quick dulling. Even after cutting an apple, the perfect shiny gray color had tarnished spotted black. The humid summer showed its effects in a proto-rust. At first I scrubbed it away, kept it clean, the *tabula rasa*, but then I stopped. Each time I thumb open the lock ring and pull on the blade I read its signs—blackened past etched in rust and preserved in tarnish.

I don't cut things everyday, but I have the knife with me among the uncuttable rocks. A tangible meditation, a reminder to myself that things have pasts, arcane names—the stellar dust, the rock-visitor, the human. The knife becomes a steel diary affirming past existence, distancing present from identities held in origins. I hold the stained blade up, playing the glint against my eye. Up to my face, I look from the knife to the cliff face and back again. Matching patterns.