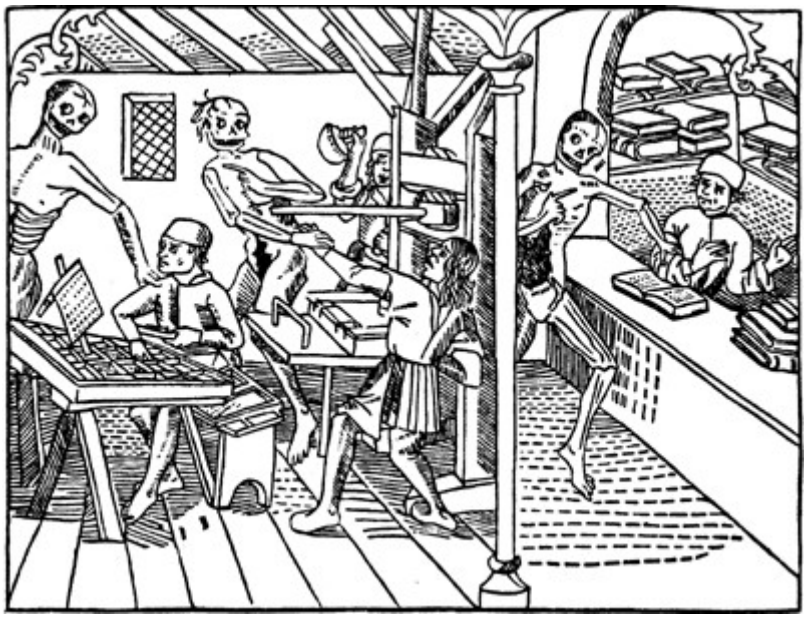
Stones and Bones



A Pocketful of Lies #2

J-P Stacey

Tis a stone and not,
A stone; a spirit, a soul and a body,
Which if you do dissolve it, it is dissolv'd,
If you coagulate it, it is coagulated,
If you make it flie, it flieth.

Ben Jonson, *The Alchemist*

Hidden depths

He lay in the tent, willing himself to move. In a minute. In another minute. By now, at home, in the warm and the dry, he'd have already been driven from his bed by the radio, if indeed it was as late as he thought it was. Rain pattered intermittently on the canvas, reminding him that, however cold it was in here, it was much worse outside.

Grassy footsteps approached his tent, accompanied by the swish-swish of waterproofs. "Rick," called a voice, not too intrusive but with enough power to wake him up, if he wasn't already. "Ri-ick," it repeated with an ironic lilt to it. He heard a third intake of breath and, before his companion could holler again, grated sleepily:

"Yes. I'm awake."

"Rick, it's 9.30. Time we were up an' at 'em."

It didn't feel like 9.30. The grim greyness of the morning was twilight through the tent walls. It felt more like evening: maybe the colour of the way home from early drinking at the Red Lion. That led him on to the thought that the nearest pub was over an hour's walk away, which (despite him having no urge to start drinking) struck him as such a miserable notion that he caught himself rolling over to go back to sleep.

Rick mumbled something that sounded sufficiently resigned to his fate; it carried easily over the grass and, from the grunt that returned to him, seemed to satisfy Tony in the next tent along. He tested his muscles against the groundslept aches he felt on every joint that had borne his weight for another minute or two, steeling himself against the damp misery ahead of him. Finally he eased his way out of the sleeping bag, one wriggle at the time. and began the tortuous process of getting dressed, all the time trying not to bump into the sopping flysheet and pour water into his haven from the elements.

Clutching a beaker of nasty coffee and some breakfast bar, Rick squinted at the folded and re-folded map, willing his eyes to wake up. The survey was barely half-finished, despite the mass of data they had collected between them. Much of what they had at their fingertips now, neither of them understood. That was fine: to be expected, in fact. Leave that for the ageing computers back in York. It was an article of faith that anything discovered with care and attention would eventually be of some use. The department's systems could churn up the data, strain out the dead mash, and distil something more easily consumed from what was left. For now, they followed the instructions fieldwork had on its wrapper, heading over to the cove yet again, staggering with boxes, assorted probes, and lengths of cable.

Millennia of running water had fashioned from the rock a wide parabolic cliff, apparently clad with oversized, weather-worn limestone blocks. Centuries of walkers had made surprisingly

little impact on its surface. Yet the slightly more acidic rain of the past few years might be having a much deeper effect. Caves, too deep and too narrow to pothole, might be opening up. A few man-sized lumps of lime had subsided, and one researcher, an archetype with unkempt hair and the electric buzz of the maybe-correct, the untested oracle, had prophesied the collapse of the whole limestone pavement. Unlikely, but possible and so to be tested. The effect it would have on the tourist trade alone won them a sizeable grant.

"I'll go up to the top. You should be able to see me when I round the top of the stairs. Call me when I'm getting close to where we sounded for depth yesterday. OK?"

Rick nodded at Tony, blowing onto his hands. The wind bit at his skin, and the rain's chafing batter chewed over the remains. He felt thoroughly miserable and, as Tony moved towards the stairs heading up the shallow tail of the cove, he wandered towards the middle of the shadow of the huge no-manmade cliff, stretched above him parabolically.

Surveying in October had seemed like a good idea back in August. Firstly, it was best to find out as soon as possible if something was going on; secondly, off-season was much more convenient for this scale of investigation (thirdly, on the day of the planning meeting the sun was blazing through the conference room windows). Two men against a party of tourists would never cope, would either waste time in the field chasing the public out of it, or waste time later throwing out bad data, false echoes from kicked stones or stout walking-sticks. One reason not mentioned out loud was that the less the interest, the better: it was exceedingly bad press for anyone to find out that the ground beneath them might, at any moment, plummet through itself some hundreds of feet. Rick wondered how much of a cover-up he was currently taking part in.

Why was he here? What had led him, from a degree in engineering and four years' work for two survey companies, to this godawful Yorkshire... *sod*, perpetually covered in whirling mists and sheep? He walked desultorily a little further then, looking up, realised he was at roughly the midpoint of the cove, some hundreds of yards distant. A thought formed in his head.

The thought was childish, but it wouldn't go away. He grinned at its childishness, and stared at the rough stone surface, bending all around him, its focus pretty much entirely occupied by Rick's body. He scanned the lines of the rock: it looked right, but he walked an arbitrary few steps forward.

There.

He sucked in air and held it. He felt his ribs stretch apart, his lungs expand under the pressure. Then, he breathed in even further, a tiny, desperate gasp, and held it again. And again, still further. His face began to purple and there were dots before his eyes, and just before he felt too dizzy to stand he bellowed every last wisp of his lungs in a primal roar, hurling everything out through his vocal cords and away from him. He felt the guttural vowel bounce and crash its way out of his throat. In that split second, he envisioned himself borne away by the echo of his own voice, coat and hair billowing, eyes blown shut. Visions too touched a deeper part of his mind, worrying him about tiny caves, many tiny caves, shaking and surprised into motion by his voice. And deeper still was the worry that Tony might wonder what the bloody hell he was doing.

But he swept all these aside, and, lost in the moment, heard his own voice return to him from all around. A chorus of faint cries all acknowledged that he, the cliff, its caves, its grassy tops and knuckled roots and all the rest of the landscape still existed. Possessed and summoned by his

multiple selves, he imagined his bones rattling in their joints, and grinned into an gale that wasn't there, that his shout was too weak to create. As he relaxed his stance, which had become Christlike with unselfconscious melodrama, he ignored the polite cough from his radio, the signal that Tony had indeed heard and was probably wondering what the hell was going on. Rick, though, unembarrassed, looked round at everything as if he had just returned from another world, and thought: maybe there had been a good reason to come here after all.

They glow, against the skin

1879: Captain Henry Marshal, of the East Surrey Regiment, discovers the treasures of Durr-i-Durran during Khost Valley expedition of the second Anglo-Afghan war. Writing to his betrothed, Agatha Best, Marshal mentions a network of caves under Khost containing a great store of treasure, and implies that he has appropriated some items from the Durranis: "Would that you had been there, my dearest Agatha, when I rounded a particularly tight corner in that squalid little rabbit-warren to discover such beauty. Not since last leaving your presence.... Perhaps your father will now look more kindly on my decision to join the Young Buffs...."

Five days later, in the mountainous territories east of Khost, Marshal is caught in a rockfall. His right arm is entirely smashed to pieces, necessitating amputation at the scene by Surgeon-Major Preston. Marshal arrives at the camp at Peshawar delirious, and dies shortly thereafter. Marshal's batman, George Eccles, arranges the safe passage of Marshal's personal effects—including some two dozen loose pearls, tightly wrapped in undergarments—out of the country.

1880: Eccles falls at the battle of Maiwand; Preston is wounded and returns home. The precise location of the riches of the Durrani passes once again into obscurity.

1883: Agatha Best, now Lady Agatha Hailsham, commissions a necklace to be made from the pearls. The task falls to the world-famous Houndsworth's, a specialist jeweller near Regent Street. Houndsworth's the company has a proud history, stretching back to Queen Elizabeth I's reign, and the grandfather of the company's founder helped work on Anne Boleyn's famous "B" necklace.

By the 1880s the company is in some difficulty. Nathaniel Houndsworth is in ailing health, but unwilling to hand the reins to his son Martin. The historian Andrew Gillman discusses Nathaniel Houndsworth's condition in some detail: "racked with pain from arthritis, symptoms of which were especially prominent in the swollen joints of his dominant right hand, Houndsworth could barely handle the jewels, let alone set them with any delicacy of touch." Michael Denning, an apprentice during the end of Houndsworth's running of the company, remembers the older man "bent over his desk like a question mark." He was clearly in terrible pain.

1884: The Khost Necklace is finished. The next day Houndsworth finds his hands utterly unusable: it is believed that his arthritis had been exacerbated by the stress of the company's last commission, and retires. Two months later, following a series of hysterical fits, he is confined in St Anthony's Hospice, Ramsgate. Lady Agatha wears the Khost Necklace to a number of prominent occasions that season.

1887: At the age of twenty-six, Lady Agatha has an accident while riding on the South Downs. She falls from the horse and lands on rocks, fracturing her skull and causing a blood clot in the brain. Although she survives with her wits intact, much of her right-hand side—arm and

leg, and her facial muscles—are weakened by the accident. She is left unable to speak.

1902: Martin Houndsworth, son of the late Nathaniel, is convicted of fraud. The remaining assets of Houndsworth's are liquidated.

1922: The eldest daughter of Lord and Lady Hailsham dies of pneumonia, aged thirty-six. She leaves two sons, Andrew and Caspar, and a daughter, Emily.

1928: Emily Hailsham marries author and essayist Robert Cookson. Robert is a favourite of the Bloomsbury set, and is rumoured to be having an affair with both Virginia Woolf and at least one of the Mitford sisters.

Emily lives the life of a Bohemian authoress and *bon vivant* in London; her novels *Out of the Water* and *A Troubled Paradise* are released to widespread acclaim in 1929 and 1932. Later works, including *Don't Worry About Her* (1934), *Never Again* (1935) and *A Lock of His Hair* (1939), are received much less favourably and critical opinion gradually turns against her, prolonging her work on the ultimately unfinished *The Burford Pariah*.

1934: Lady Agatha dies, leaving Emily to inherit the Khost Necklace.

1944: During the British invasion of Nazi-occupied France, the now Sergeant Robert Cookson is killed on Omaha Beach. Eye witnesses later confirm his heroism: he attempts to return a live grenade to the enemy, but the ordnance explodes as it leaves his grasp.

1947: Leaving a society ball, Emily Cookson is involved in a minor accident: her writing hand is slammed in a car door, breaking several small bones. She hires a typist to continue work on *The Burford Pariah*, but her habit of heavy drinking gradually turns into alcoholism.

1948: With mounting financial problems Emily Cookson is forced to sell the Khost Necklace. No records exist of the sale, but it is believed to be at an unfavourable price to her major creditor, convicted thief and “spiv” Terry White: certainly Emily receives little actual money in return for the necklace.

1955: Emily Cookson dies of complications arising from delirium tremens.

1962: Terry White is found murdered; according to autopsy his body contained over two hundred bullets, and his "shooting hand" is itself shot entirely to pieces.

1969: The Khost Necklace resurfaces at auction. Little can be reconstructed about the intervening years, but three jewellers including Michael Denning himself (now aged 97) testify to the likelihood of its veracity. During surface transport to auction, the crate carrying the necklace falls fifty feet from a hoist, and another crate lands on top of it; the necklace is broken and some pearls are lost. The Khost pearls are eventually sold singly to a number of private investors.

1973: Bryan Stanley Johnson, avant-garde author, commits suicide; a pearl, believed to be from the Khost Necklace, sits beside the bath in which he is found. Friend and agent Michael Bakewell later admits to receipt of the manuscript inspired by Johnson's acquisition, *Pearls Before Swiving, or The Nature of the Beast*, but it is destroyed during a failed burglary.

1977: Musician Marc Bolan dies in a car accident. On his right finger is a gold ring with a Khost pearl inset, believed to be a gift from David Bowie. This pearl, like Johnson's, is bought by a private foreign investor.

2002: Yvonne Chevalier, “holistic healer to the stars”, buys the five pearls previously

unaccounted for. Four of these are ground down to form part of an expensive treatment against skin ageing, and Chevalier is feted by the rich and famous. Soon afterwards, however, her soldier son Hal disappears during the battle of Shahi-Kot in Paktia Province. Chevalier becomes a vocal anti-war campaigner, while Hal, with the keepsake given to him by his mother, is declared missing in action.

Mortar dream

You must understand, sir, the difficulties I face in preparing this document. To state what is unusual is easy enough; it is, in fact, a trait common to your people and mine, to take note of events which take us by surprise. But to describe the very hegemony that rules every day of our lives is far harder; not to fall into the trap, of assuming that what is obvious to us must also be just as clear to you, is the danger that I must brave again and again as I compile the record that you may now, I hope, be reading. With this in mind I crave that you excuse my impudence in beginning with so bold a statement as that with which I must now furnish my narrative: I do so in order to shatter and disperse your preconceptions and my complacencies in equal measure.

We—that is to say my people—live in rooms built from the silted-down cast-offs of the dreams dreamt by you and your kind. My compatriots and I—yet we have no true country, no father- or motherland—inhabit some ten billion interconnected caverns, each of which is perpetually constructed and reconstructed by the remains of what you once imagined.

Such a brazen statement—at first glance incomprehensible (to you)—no doubt needs further explanation. Accept for now, however, that your dreams, once enlivened, do not die when you wake; rather, each continues a separate existence separate from both the dreamer and his or her recollections. For each of your world's souls (if you will forgive my rather fanciful terminology) there is a room in ours, and an occupant; this room is furnished with those corresponding dreams, and its occupant nourished and entertained with them, and together both lodgings and lodger provide the final resting-place for whatever the dreams become.

The process by which this protean stuff leaks out of your world and condenses in ours is obscure, and our scientists and philosophers (such as we have, for our accretive universe is conducive neither to science nor philosophy) have yet to agree on even a theory, let alone the precise details. Our world is barely understood as an allegory of yours, or as a more surreal mirror, that colours your events with whimsical, ornate details; rather, its very nature utterly reinterprets the slumbering imaginations of yours, transforming it into substances and objects that the dreamer could never predict—

Forgive me! Such convoluted and queer imaginings must make little sense to you. Permit me to illuminate instead with an example. I must begin by explaining that our term for an individual inhabitant of your world is "factor", a name which acknowledges the role they play in ours. Let us consider such a factor dreaming of being chased in a condemned mansion. Their pursuer wishes to do them harm, and as they run or, more frighteningly, pace behind the factor's dream-self, they wield a polished, heavy knife with sinister intent. They turn down one gloomy, slippery claustrophobic corridor after another, their legs feeling more leaden every minute. Fear clumps together into an almost tangible, sweaty clod in the pit of their stomach. Suddenly, as the hand of their enemy is on their shoulder, they wake with a start and, some moments later, they have almost entirely forgotten the sensation of being chased, that awful anticipation, the glint of

their enemy's weapon.

In the mean time their counterpart, in our world, has become aware of the dream. They never perceive it directly, but rather catch peripheral glimpses, as though of a sound heard through tinnitus or of a flash seen out of the corner of an eye. Thus forewarned, they sit and wait. Before their eyes, their accommodation is presently augmented with (for example) new castors on their writing-desk; a black, drooping pelmet flutters over the top of their curtains; and the light beside their bed burns fiercely bright. Such are the fates of the respective components of the dream: the pursuit; the fear; the flashing blade.

Can you imagine an existence in our mutable, unpredictable world? Where dreams settle, condense and ultimately become concrete, only to be ground back down into dust by layers of more and more dreams? A world where one day the fabric of one's reality might flutter, billow and then suddenly change like the sheets on a bed? In such a world, society as such is impossible; politicking, punishments and governance are worthless concepts when one is largely, if erratically, provided for, and when our populace is neither fixed nor controllable by our own actions, concerted or individual. Our only firm grasp on an utterly changeable universe consists of a concerted attempt to infer the more predictable structure of yours.

To this end, a number of us have begun cataloguing the experiences that leak through into each of us of the dreams that ultimately form his personal space, at the same time as you yourself perceive them. They—or perhaps I should say we, for I must count myself among these obsessives—also attempt to compile descriptions of as many literary and cultural artefacts as our rooms are furnished with, so that we might discern common patterns that hint at their origin. Though we are confounded and bamboozled by our own physicality—our history books turn into housebricks, or our inkwells sprout spidery legs and wander off—we have nonetheless made some recent advances in our studies, and now fully comprehend such diverse aspects of your reality as shipbuilding since your recent "Industrial Refutation", many aspects of the current racial tensions in your New World countries, and how to effect the baking of porcelainware.

Yet even with the combined efforts of all our "historians," much about your world remains unclear. We do not know precisely how the people there procreate, although there is a widely-held belief that one half of your population has the ability to whisper gently and amiably into the cupped ears of the other, and thus in some way initiate gestation.

Unlike in the world that has fashioned ours, the inhabitants of ours never gestate: they are not born, and they do not die. Rather, each is first discovered—by himself, by others—wandering somewhat confused in the locality of his room. Indeed, it is by finding the occupant that we usually find the room itself, its newly-minted door normally indistinguishable from the walls of our catacombs. We shepherd the fellow to his lodgings, where he makes his home, subject to the whims of furnishing and sustenance of the connection to your world.

Eventually, his factor's mortality runs its brief course, and it becomes clear to our comrade—whether by the changing substance of his dream-accretions, or simply by a sort of instinct—that the dreamer has died; yet the process of construction continues after death, although at a vastly reduced rate. Death does not stop the dreamer from dreaming, though most of your acquaintance would no doubt presume otherwise!

For as long afterwards as anyone has cared to record (and the eldest among us, whilst these days being a good deal more addled than even the most confused of foundlings, still try to retain

the most basic inventory of their surroundings) dream-experiences continue to trickle through into our realm, as rainwater and soil might collect in the dreamer's hollowed-out head. At the same time such structures, colonnades, gardens, chairs, writing-desks, kitchens, pots, pans, samovars and all the rest, as have already been put in the room: these remain for ever, and their construction begins to ossify and set in a way which is hard to describe but plain to apprehend.

So what remains to be done after the factor's apparent death is the addition and correction of small details. One of us might arrive in their otherwise completed room one day, only to receive from their dead counterpart a brief notion of tree branches waving in a fresh, spring breeze. If they were to then make an inventory of their room, they might spot bright, bejewelled eyes on the carving that has adorned their walking-stick for decades. Or, with a shiver that penetrates to his marrow, they might find themselves unable to shrug off an amorphous feeling of limitless and perpetual darkness; when, unbidden, this experience eventually fades, there might be another grape on a vine, a few more buttons on a pearled jacket, or a faint, ungraspable tinkling of bells when one turns one's head. After the apparent death of the factor, these ornamentations appear less frequently in the room as decay follows its natural course; yet they never seem to fully cease, and one will always eventually be surprised by some unostentatious novelty, placed almost lovingly in the room like flowers by a headstone.

Our world seems to exist entirely as a concreted effect of your world's intangible causes: we sit in chairs, and breathe in perfumes, and eat breads and meats, that once had fantastical and entirely *other* existence in your heads. It is not known whether there might be some hope of communication in the other direction: from us to you. Yet much as *your* hopes and desires have taken on physical if incomprehensible aspect in my world, so have *my* hopes of such a connection been placed in this brief document. I crave that, with the perspective granted you by both your dreaming and waking worlds, you might appreciate ours more than any of us are truly able.

Though in some ways our world appears melancholy and without direction, yet the unintentional gratitude of you and the billions of other factors permits us to study and learn. Our only tragedy is that we ourselves can never dream—to where would our dreams fly when we wake?—but we have much to console ourselves nonetheless. We spend our time fashioning miniature and baroque word-games, logic puzzles and other intellectual trivialities, which though today mean nothing and tomorrow might mean even less, are nonetheless inspired by, and built upon, what you offer us. I personally have read what I believe are many classics in your literature —cheered on Raskolnikov as he denounced the prosecutors, wept for joy at the reconciliation of Kurtz with his ageing parents and his first love—all of which have been provided, if unintentionally, by your grace.

With this in mind I offer you, my factor, some small recompense. When I have finished this brief description of all that we know and feel, I shall place it in the centre of my own room. Let it be my humble gift to you, the great architect of my beautiful accommodation; though (and this alone I know to be true, for my heart tells me so) you lie deep interred, still your sleep of earth and your dreams of soil conjure my walls, my chairs, and even the scents on the air which I breathe. Let some essential spark of you comprehend our existences and the debt of mere being which we owe you. Let all this reach you as you moulder in your grave (as we shall never do): not dead, merely dreaming.

Stones and Bones

If love
is blind, he
sighs, let your
skin sear and
crack, my eyes
seal up and
dry.

Yes, love
is blind, she
cries, yet faults
not seen are
not, nor can
love's vision
lie.

He meets she in
the centre
of rich
fruit
by poor
hands torn of
its meat and oil

We play the games our hearts equip us for

We roll our stones and bones around the floor

O great computer!

~ Saturn ~

Rhys hated that there were always other people there. They littered the place, worse than the food wrappers, tickets and plastic bags they brought with them; they were lichen, clinging to everything and wearing it down. As the days grew longer in the spring, and he had more daylight in which to make his observations, so the number of people waxed too (although, even at the winter solstice, a dark and grim scrap of a festival, he could never find himself alone). In short, he wanted them all to go home or die, or to disappear somehow and never have been.

It belonged to him, he knew, even though he had never experienced it alone. He was like a rich landowner in possession of fields and paths that he could not fence off from the public. One or two local members of the landed gentry had persecuted Rhys in the past, so he had no sympathy for their privileged sort, but he was adamant that his situation was different: his blood and his bones yearned for that place; much as he owned it, it owned him.

He had tried on numerous occasions to be present when others were not; had surveyed the fields and the lay of the land during the day; had returned at night, intent on reaching the centre of the structure. But every time there had always been someone, some security guard or curator, vigilant at their post; Rhys, unwilling to provoke a confrontation, had always capitulated, sloping back into the evening and home. Only once, on a misty February morning, had he made the entire journey unmolested. He had left the house early, tramping a frosty dew into nothingness on the grassier fields, and made his way over barbed wire, through hedgerows and across ditches to the start of the Avenue by the cottages. From there, he had followed the entire true route to the site, curving round the way a procession might have done, and reaching the road near the Slaughter Stone. Emboldened by that lone success, he had tried the route a few more times, but always been spotted on protected, proscribed stretches; the last attempt resulted in a caution, and he dared not risk being banned from the site entirely.

As part of his daily and less adventurous routine there was a particular path that he took from Larkhill. It led him through the fields and across the *Cursus*, and in his mind's eye the gnarled, rootlike fingers that had cleared it so many years ago had never actually lost their vigour, nor turned into dust. Those hands still dug and toiled whenever Rhys thought of them, which was often. On this route, he would round the corner by Durrington Down Farm, and on a clear day the sight of the monument would always strike him as powerfully as the first time he saw it as a child. Those less eagle-eyed might not from that point spot the still tiny structure on the horizon. But he had acquainted himself with every curve and bank of the land for miles around; had grasped it warmly with his hands; had rubbed each green ridge with his feet until the earthy smell of times past was carried up to his nose, mixed with composty grass and animal dung.

Every time, he passed Mr Armitage's house on the way in; he always remembered how the old man had defended him once, when he had been caught by the police. Realistically, his mother had probably given Armitage a gentle nudge, as the ex-magistrate had always been sweet on her. She probably hadn't asked him to say what he had, though, as Rhys caught Armitage winkingly reassuring the police that "the boy" was feeble-minded but otherwise harmless. But Rhys didn't care. The old sod could think what he liked. They all could, if only they would all go

away and think it somewhere else.

~ Jupiter ~

The impact of the front door on its frame shook the house; the noise made the panes of glass sing in the rickety window at the top of the stairs, and return to Rhys like the echo of a cry. Another day of wandering round, trying to be left alone, in vain. Every few steps Rhys would draw a bead from one stone to another, trying to lose himself in calculations, only to find either the line or his own body jostled by some gabbling pakamak. Rhys had been gloomily glad when the rain had started to fall on him, present as he was with no jacket of his own, as it gave him the excuse to quit, and not prolong his disappointment.

He made to go upstairs, then paused, as a thought began to form. He turned back and locked the door. The idea began to rush upon him that the day might not be wasted yet; that fired his muscles and raised the hairs on the back of his neck. Though he was still stood at the bottom of the stairs his mind was already up in his room, and his body had to catch up: quick. Hammering his feet on each step he could hear the blood pound just as hard in his ears, and felt his stomach drop away from him. He tilted forwards towards the top step and flapped his hands on the carpet to propel himself faster, flailing up in a four-limbed tangle; his mind was above, his lights down below, and his arms and legs all over the place.

At the top of the stairs, Rhys grabbed the handle, opened his bedroom door, left it to bang shut behind him, lifted up his duvet, pulled out the trunk, clicked its locks free, lifted the lid and grabbed the large scroll and purse within. He slowed then, arranging the objects with reverence, as if they were more than priceless: magical or masonic, full of invisible energy. He unfurled the scroll across his bed, weighing down each corner with four pebbles from the purse. He stuck his hand back into the bag to fetch more stones, and then stopped, weighing up the image that was before him.

The museums could afford their intricately carved models, but this paper map, wide as two arm-lengths and tall as one, was as useful to Rhys as any of them might have been. More so, for his purposes, for his design emphasized what theirs did not; indeed, could not, because the museum curators were uninterested to the point of blindness in what Rhys had discovered.

Although the plan of the stones themselves still existed in thin pencil lines, occasionally redrawn and darkened where they had become too faint, such a detail was no longer the main purpose of the diagram. These mere details of geography were covered with lines in several different colours: green, red and blue for astronomical directions; but also two shades of purple and three of orange-to-yellow, each of which denoted a different flavour to a survey that Rhys had taken across the site, with shades of meaning that Rhys understood but could not put into words. Sometimes they overlapped with ley lines, or the paths between the nearby villages, or both; sometimes they had been made on a particular day, at a particular time, and produced an effect pleasing to Rhys. The trilithons, the Heel Stone, and the Slaughter Stone were all marked with deep-blue crosses, whilst the Aubrey holes, a circle of 56 post holes some 80 metres in diameter, were coloured in a particularly vivid red.

Rhys had guessed some time ago that each successive rebuilding of the stones had been a refinement on some principle of the previous construction. And what he had seen a few weeks ago—or, more precisely, not been able to see—had finally confirmed to Rhys what that principle

was. As he knelt down by the chart on his bed, he tried to picture where he had been that time, and where he had been looking; with that in mind, even the scant and incomplete observations he had been able to make today might have some value.

Deep in thought, he marked places from time to time on the map with flattened glass marbles. Often the juxtaposition of two or three or even four such markers led him to put another down in their centre, or on a particular axis of conjunction. Occasionally, with a triumphant flourish, he would take a ruler and pencil from his desk and affirm the arrangement with a permanent line.

In this way Rhys spent the next few hours playing what appeared to be some ancient boardgame against himself, thrilling at his own victories, excited even further by his failures. The day darkened and became evening; his parents came home and called up to him; the television went on, and once or twice the telephone rang; but nothing penetrated Rhys' concentration, as he wondered again and again about the next move he might make.

~ Mars ~

Head buzzing with new alignments and new possibilities for success, feet itchy for the Durrington Down road, a torch and some biscuits in his rucksack, he practically fell down the stairs—two, then three, then a final four steps at a time—and was reaching out for the front door when his mum called from the front room.

"Rhys! Come in here a sec!"

He lowered his outstretched arm, looking at the handle as if it were receding irretrievably from his grasp, breathed heavily a couple of times and then trudged back down the hallway towards his mum's voice. He saw his dad first, sat in the armchair, holding a mug of tea, smiling thinly. As he stepped into the room Rhys could smell cigarette smoke, which meant that his mum must be *really* nervous. She never smoked indoors, except when she did, which was usually when Rhys had been in trouble. He hadn't been caught doing anything wrong recently, though.

"We've got some news. Your dad's got that new job at Penny's—you know, the one he went to the interview for last month?" Rhys tried to looked blank but vaguely interested. He remembered his dad had set off early one morning to catch a train from Salisbury station, but hadn't really paid much attention to where he had said he was going to. "Well, they really want him to start as soon as possible, which is great, isn't it?" She started talking to his dad. "Especially with Moreton Electrics looking like it could close any day now."

"They'll want me to work out my notice, will Moreton, love," he warned. "At least a month."

"Well," she countered, "it'll take us longer than that to-" She suddenly turned back to Rhys. He had a knack for receding into the background, she noted: it was easy to forget he was there sometimes, and he her only son! "Sorry, Rhys, love, we were trying to tell you. Penny's is up in Worcester. That's a long way from here, nearly a hundred miles." Rhys' face was still calm. "He can't do that commute every day, love." Rhys nodded, waiting for more information. "We're going to have to move to Worcester."

It was at that point that Rhys' face started to move. First his eyes widened. "We know you love it round here, darlin'," his mum continued. "But we thought that it might be better for you to

have a change of scene." Rhys' mouth opened slackly. "It's not healthy for you, going out at all hours. There was that trouble with the police as well. It'd be good to put all that behind you. And you'd be able to make lots more friends in Worcester. It's a lovely town, isn't it, Dad?" His dad agreed, nodding his head; Rhys regained control over his face and started to screw it up instead, into a single frown. "It's got cinemas, and a bowling alley. And there's a good college there that we reckon you'll get into if we all pitch in a bit."

Rhys was once again stationary, apart from his right hand which shook a little. "Well," his mother said after twenty seconds had passed in silence. "Don't just stand there with a look like thunder, love. Say something."

Rhys looked from his mum to his dad, and back again. He worked his mouth for a second or two, trying to form words. Then, finally, he could speak. "No," Rhys mumbled quietly. Then, louder: "No. No! *No!*" Still shouting, he bolted from the room and out of the front door, not caring to close it behind him.

Back in the living room, Rhys' dad had left the chair and was making to follow his son, when his mum put her hand out to him. "Leave it, Paul. He'll be all right."

"At this time of night?" his dad cried. "It's pitch black out there and bloody freezing to boot. He'll catch his death." But instead of putting his shoes on, he stomped around the living room, knowing his son was hardier than that. "And where the hell does he think he's going to get to any-bloody-way?"

Rhys' mum sat down on the settee and sighed. "Where do you think, love?" she said wearily, and fished a packet of cigarettes out of her handbag. "He'll go straight to the stones."

~ Venus ~

Weeks passed, and once he had overcome the initial shock of his parents' announcement, Rhys was able to work once again on the grand plans under his bed and in his head. With time no longer on his side he decided to take a notebook with him to the site and back. It increased the risk of his discovery, but was necessary to speed up his studies during the month or two—perhaps even less—remaining to him.

He made several experiments based on his earlier observations. A position near the twenty-fifth Aubrey hole provided some solace, but only if he did not turn round: rotational movement gave him away. He found he could pass along the permitted sections of a route curving between the Station Stones to touch the edge of the South Barrow, and be utterly unnoticed as long as he kept moving. He repeatedly walked sections of this route, in between tourists and their cameras, or their cameras and the stones, but they all seemed oblivious to his passing (he wondered if they would even spot him when they looked through the photographs later). But when he stopped suddenly during a particular transit, made wary by an approaching official, he saw the looks on the faces of people nearby suddenly change: their eyes flicked towards him, and some of them even turned to gape at this young man suddenly in their midst. That route was not perfect, he realised, but it provided clues to perfection.

Before long his mind was a heap of geometry, shapes and paths lying round like fragments of pottery with thin straws between them. One day, with driving rain trapping him in the house, Rhys sat at his desk and stared out at the weather, willing it to improve so that he might return to

his fieldwork. Then, suddenly, it was like a flashbulb had ignited in his brain, but a moment afterwards burnt out and disappeared.

That's it, Rhys thought. That's the place I'm after. I had it just now, but I lost it again.

He screwed up his eyes to concentrate, to try to sift out all the chippings and clutter that hid the genuine artefact, the shards that did not make up his prize. Like an archaeologist he peeled and lifted, and then brushed away the dirt from whatever was left. He stoppered his ears to the rushing, pattering sound of water falling outside and pictured instead the stones falling from the sky.

He saw the site, empty of its building work, the midsummer sun making the green grass lush and wet. Into this pastoral scene dropped rock after rock in slow motion, each shuddering and grinding to a halt as the others followed closely behind. Gradually, they built themselves up into an irregular pile, tumbling down and striking each other, crashing together and bellowing a clattering lament across his brain.

Finally, with one last thump, the disorder he saw contained every stone that ever was placed, and some that never were, ones that Rhys himself would himself have placed given the chance. All the stones necessary for the perfect henge were there, the henge that would have made its purpose obvious to anyone.

Then, as Rhys put his fists to his temples, the sun itself detached from the imaginary scene, and floated down into the centre of the mound, shrinking and brightening as it did so. At its touch, the stones rolled away, scuttling into position. One by one they put themselves in their correct locations as their builders had intended, leaving the now blinding point of light where Rhys now knew he would have to reach: there, precisely there, he could be unseen by and unseeing of everyone else in the world. Everyone else would disappear, and he would too.

Rhys opened his eyes at this realisation, and saw his goal clearly. To reach it was the puzzle now. There was no perfectly invisible route, he knew. But what was important was that, en route, nobody was to see him: he could accept, briefly, seeing others. And if he were visible in theory to the rather sparse crowds milling around, he could content himself on the journey with being effectively out of sight, with people hidden temporarily behind those merely physical artefacts, the stones themselves.

It was necessary to return to the plan. He closed his eyes again, and the completed structure was once again presented to him, a bright globe marking the point of perfect balance. Remembering each aspect of his workings and jottings in turn, he overlaid the networks he had discovered on top of the henge, the networks that the henge itself mapped out in secret.

He twisted and pulled at each of the lines between points, one by one; they barely yielded, but clicked instead from one archaeological socket to the next, like dislocating joints: 31st hole to Northern Low; Heel to the Great; blue to blue. He shifted his axes, pushed again, bent the spokes between Y holes and Z holes, brought his weight to bear on the path from the Avenue, and then, without any warning: joy!

He had almost everything he needed: the why, the where, and the how. Now he only had to wait for the when.

Over the next few weeks he perfected the plan. There could be no risk of being seen, he realised: neither the local police nor the curators would welcome any further intransigence on his part. He made fewer observations—he could conjure the stones both seen and unseen at will, which was more than the site itself could provide him with—and no experiments at all, so as not to raise suspicion.

One day, he knew, he would have to make it his last ever journey to the stones. The house move was in a week's time, and most of his parents' belongings were already packed. They hadn't been into his room yet, but he knew they would venture in there soon enough, with unflattened boxes, suitcases and tea-chests. He couldn't risk them finding his maps, even though they might not themselves lead to his secret. Besides, it would be a suitable day to bid his farewells, he decided: there was a planetary conjunction, and it was a perfect division of the times between both solar and lunar eclipses.

Satisfied with the astronomical fitness of it all, he methodically tore his great drawings into strips, and the strips into rough squares. These he soaked to a pulp in the sink, and then ran the waste disposal unit. The flattened marbles he put in his pockets: he could drop those into the bins in the centre of the town. When there was nothing left except in his mind's eye, he left the house. At the end of the road he turned to look at his home in the distance, and murmured: "Bye." Then he turned the corner and made towards the henge.

There were no mistakes: every step he trod across the site was accurate to the millimetre, so much so that he was sure he could sometimes see the outlines of the lines in his mind glowing in the grass under him. And they never saw him, any of them: not the tourists, the guides, the security guards or the curators; not even his parents, or his Auntie Jean's family; nor could the police find him, though eventually they came looking mob-handed, with most of Larkhill and a handful of journalists in tow. The local police were hardly the acid test for discovery, but if the paparazzi could not track him down, nobody could.

And though there has been talk ever since, of a young man who haunts the stones; whom visitors sometimes swear they have seen out of the very narrowest corners of their eyes; whom the occasional nightwatchman might claim to have spied crossing the site at night, and followed to a sarsen only to have the figure before them vanish as if he had never been there; it was only talk, and nobody was ever to lay solid hand or convincing eye on the fleeting figure. Finally, for Rhys, everyone had gone away for good.

Sense of place

He started the car engine, then almost immediately stopped it. He still needed to calm down. Even the best visits to see Mother were bad for his nerves, but this time had been awful. There was never any talking to her on certain subjects. For a start, she'd never liked Angie—had once called her (not to her face) a scrawny little bitch, all ribs and teeth—and had only grudgingly blessed their union when she had realised she risked losing her beloved son for good. So he could hardly discuss what had been happening at home. And Mother had never acknowledged how much Father used to knock them all—Mother included—about the house as though they were dice rattling in a cup. There was no shared ground there, for loving reminiscences about the days before the old bugger popped his clogs. But today it had been clear

from the start that, despite the dangers hiding behind every other possible topic of conversation, explaining to Mother why they needed to sell the house she had lived in for sixty years was not the comparatively easy option.

He could still picture her now. She had planted herself into the carpet, with the heavy, bulbous writing-desk on her right, drawers and board locked and snapped together, and the dresser looming over her left shoulder, a faded dinner set exhibited on it behind a lattice of vertical dowels, and a collection of family photographs beneath. She was occupying a position of power, an intersection of domestic ley lines, and it looked like there was no budging her this side of doomsday.

He had tried to reason with her. That was a mistake: the house wasn't about reason; it was about family. He wouldn't be suggesting she move out, he explained, if it weren't *absolutely* necessary. He knew how much she loved the place, but—and he never finished the sentence. "You've *no idea* how I feel about this place," she countered, and then she was off. Dad this, Grandad that, his sister and two brothers the other. Spending a honeymoon decorating the front room. All of the children born in the master bedroom upstairs; all of them growing up; all of them leaving; poor Graham, the eldest, lost at Goose Green.

Well, of course, he said, he loved it too. He tried to crack wise, recalled cracking his head on the stone lintel at the bottom of the stairs. He would miss the old place too. "You say it," she replied, "but you don't mean it. You don't feel it in your bones like I do." And there was never any arguing with her bones. Some families were governed by the matriarch's moles, but his was built around his mother's thin frame. It was supported by her compactness and springiness; it spread and moved from place to place at her articulation alone—whenever it reluctantly did so then she complained her joints ached; and Graham and Father would always be her phantom limbs, limbs that nonetheless could easily, magically, take the whole weight of her whole argument if the occasion demanded.

It was then that it occurred to him: what about her bones? First he told her he was sorry, that he didn't want to upset her. He only had her best interests in mind: "aye, and me money," she interjected, but he carried on apologising all the same. It's her house and he shouldn't have raised the idea of her selling it like that.

But what would happen, he asked after half a beat, if she became sick? What would happen if she fell? Who would help her if she was in this house all alone? And as she started to reply, saying that she could ring either him or his sister and they'd come over, he asked her how she would reach the telephone from the bathroom with a broken hip. There was no reply to that, of course (not even the obvious negative) that didn't admit she was old. And that was out of the question.

As he was saying all this she had taken one hesitating step backward and put her hand on the dresser to steady herself. He stood up and moved towards her, explaining that it was best for her, never mind the rest of them, if she would just live somewhere with people to look after her all the time. "You're going to put me in a home," she said, matter-of-factly. Then she repeated it, but in a wail that ended with her breaking into tears. "Only," she cried, and then wept a little more.

He stood up at this, and walked over to hug her. He hadn't hugged her, not properly, for years, but thought he would try it out. She was so small, and seemed to be made entirely out of

shoulderblades and elbows. "Only," she said again, muffled in his embrace, "only I'm *already* in me home. I don't need to go anywhere else."

He told her they could talk about it another time. He said she shouldn't worry too much till then (knowing she would), and just make sure instead that she was making the right decision either way (knowing she would). He said that he and Charlie and Ellie would be there for her, whatever she decided. He even called her Mum. And when he stopped hugging her then he himself was standing with the dresser to his left and the writing-desk to his right. Two minutes later he was out of the door and another thirty seconds later he was round the corner and sat in the car.

Both hands on the steering-wheel, he now smiled grimly to himself. She was a hard woman, his mother. She almost never cried; the last time he remembered her doing so was at Father's funeral. So when he saw the first few tears... that was when he had known for certain: he had won. She would sell, although it might take her a long time to decide. She would move out. Satisfied, he started the engine again, and gently—so gently that it seemed almost loving—he pulled the car out and moved away.

A chat with relatives

Thoughtful, unspeaking,
With head bowed,
He scoops clay out of brick
And ceramic,
That sweeter, finer lining tanned
To nut-brown leather.
From a now empty beaker
Ringed with ivory,
Licked with thin skin,
Man
Calls to man
Through years drained, drowned, backwashed, silted, dumped;
But a child,
Here under duress
By the vessel in the case,
Might as well be eating stones.

The parable of the traveller and the innkeeper

There was once a traveller who had left so many miles behind him that all he saw was strange to his eyes. He had begun his journey young, and almost exhausted his youth in travelling. Now he was nearly a man, but felt somehow still, in part, like a boy. He yearned to be young no more, but did not know how he might make that happen.

For many months the traveller passed through a hot, humid country, scattered with rocks and sweet-smelling succulents. On a day of particularly searing heat a great thirst came upon him, and he felt as though the skin on his bones might set aflame. As he rounded the corner of a mountainside which gave off its own chalky heat he saw, in the distance, a cottage with a run-

down roof, surrounded by unruly fields. There was a horse tied up outside the building, and the sound of movement was carried over to him on the flat, heavy breeze. When he saw the horse drink water from a trough, the traveller could resist no longer, and stumbled down a rocky escarpment to the container of warm liquid. Falling to his knees at its side, he drank his fill.

Lifting his head after a time he saw a fat gentleman, with an apron over his clothes, looking at him with interest. The traveller knew a few words of the local language and stuttered a greeting. At first his new companion said nothing in response, and the traveller thought he might have misunderstood. Then suddenly he returned the compliment in a dialect of the common tongue, flattened and bent by the accent of the country. He welcomed the traveller to the region and also, as he explained, to his tavern. The taverner beckoned to the traveller to follow him into the cottage, and then walked through the door into the darkness beyond. The traveller swallowed in trepidation and his throat, now sated, felt tender as it clenched. Making up his mind he followed.

The taverner was already behind a wooden-topped bar, and reaching up to shelves for a little food. He asked the traveller if he wanted bread—then corrected himself, and asked if he had money for bread. The traveller admitted that he did indeed have some funds, and jangled a few small coins onto the counter. This seemed to satisfy his host, and within moments there was food and drink in place of the coins. The traveller was hungry and ate rapidly, and all the while his host quizzed him about his journey, while the traveller in return asked questions about the area.

The traveller, leaving home at so tender an age, had never visited the taverns of his motherland and did not know quite what to expect. Its keeper, as he nonetheless had expected, sold wine, bread and cheese, and there were stools on which to sit and tables up to which the stools could be pulled. It was a custom of his own country that taverns would also let those passing through lodge for a time. After a minute's quiet he asked: did the taverner have any rooms to let? The taverner readily admitted he had three, above the public area in which they both currently stood. That made him an innkeeper, the traveller thought, as this innkeeper named a price. At this, the traveller's face fell. He admitted that he could not afford such an amount, and that the food before him had all but exhausted his funds.

"Well," the innkeeper said, rubbing the roll of stubbly fat under his chin and then round to the back of his neck. "This is a quiet time for me. The cattle herders have headed south, and almost everyone from the local villages has gone to the city for the parades and fiestas. They will not return for some weeks. And so nobody is buying my wine or my cheese, and I cannot afford to let you stay for nothing."

"I can work for my board," the traveller pleaded. "I can repair your roof and your chimney. My father was a carpenter, and I can work with stones a little. I can also help plough your fields, and make the tavern ready for when the villagers return."

The innkeeper had a simple soul. He also had lazy bones, and at the thought of so many tasks performed by the young traveller his face lit up with a smile. He agreed readily to this arrangement, and began cleaning some of the bowls behind the bar with a dirty cloth.

"You are a godsend, my boy," the innkeeper said. "If you perform all these tasks you will certainly earn your keep and more. Though I have very little money to give you to help you on your travels, I will show you something far greater than money. I will show you the way to the most blessed stone cross, high on the nearby hill. It will be the making of you, my boy. It will

make you a man."

The traveller's attention was drawn by this statement, and he asked the innkeeper: what was this stone cross of which the innkeeper spoke? The innkeeper explained that the stone was indeed holy, shaped out of the rock by the grace of God himself. He said that in that region for as long as anyone could remember there was told the story of a saint, the name now lost to time, who had walked up the hill as a penance, laden with all his belongings. Baking in the heat of a sabbath's midday the saint had prostrated himself before the stone. There he had found himself in miraculous communion with the Lord Almighty, who had told him a great and powerful secret. The innkeeper explained that he himself was now too old and too fat to make such a penance, and would probably expire before he reached the top. But the young traveller! If he were to make such a penance, reciting a prayer at each turn in the path, and reaching the summit just as the sun touched the peak of the hill opposite, then he too would learn something subtle and wise about the innermost heart of man.

The traveller could barely wait for the next sabbath in five days' time. Those days passed either slowly or quickly, the traveller couldn't tell, as he had to work hard for his keep and thus had little time in which to be distracted. The number of tasks that the innkeeper could find for him multiplied every day, now that the fat man could rely on an almost inexhaustible youth to perform them. He soon made good the roof and the chimney, and then found himself sweeping the tavern and its steps, and cleaning out the rooms. Although he was kept busy, each day he would step outside several times, only for a moment, to breathe in the clean air and gaze up at the hill; at midday, and before and after.

Soon it was the evening before the sabbath, and the innkeeper and the traveller were sat inside the darkening room of the tavern. No fire was lit, for the heat of the day was still lifting off the bricks and drifting through the tavern. The innkeeper said to the traveller: "Tomorrow is the sabbath. We do not work on that day and so in my heart I cannot ask you to work for me. Perhaps you should complete your penance instead, eh?" And he pointed towards the mountain, and winked at the traveller.

The next day the traveller set out when the sun was almost over the peak opposite. The journey was long and arduous, as with his pack on his back and a stick in one hand he made his way in the waxing sunshine up the dry path. At each turn he would have to make himself remember to pray, and once, dizzy and thirsty, he almost forgot why he was even there. By the time he reached the peak his brain was misty with the heat, but in front of him he saw a stone in the shape of the cross. No sign of flintknife or sawtooth could be seen on its surface, yet it was unmistakably cruciform, balanced somehow on the end of its longest bar. He knelt painfully in front of the cross for some minutes, but felt nothing and eventually, disappointed, headed back down the hill towards the tavern. On the way down his legs ached far more than on the journey up, and he was tempted to throw his pack down the steep slope, and pick it up at the bottom.

He found the innkeeper waiting for him outside the tavern, and he asked what the traveller had seen. "I saw the cross," he admitted, "but nothing more. I did not feel God near me. The penance did not work."

"When did you set out?" asked the innkeeper. "Where was the sun?"

The traveller pointed, as the innkeeper had done nearly a week before. "Nearly over the peak of that hill there."

At this, the innkeeper shook his head. "You must have set out too late. The sun must be at the top of that peak, when you are at the top of the other. That is how the saint arrived at the cross. But there is always next sabbath, if you want to try again."

The traveller agreed that he should remain in the tavern for another week. Six days now, they were spent by the traveller in yet more tasks set for him by the innkeeper. There seemed no end to the work that was available to be done around the tavern, as though it had been neglected for months or even years. Before the six days were out the traveller had cleaned every bowl, glass and plate in the tavern, and had moved wine barrels to and fro so often that he dreamt of their round, fat shape, and sometimes in his sleep thought of himself carrying the innkeeper up and down the cellar steps. Yet even with such a weight of work, the traveller made sure that each day at least once he looked up at the mountain, at the top of which he was certain he discerned the cross.

Sabbath's eve arrived a second time, and the innkeeper and the traveller were resting after the toil of the day. Sweet smells of blossom were blown through the tavern's open door, disturbing the stifling heat. The innkeeper said to the traveller: "Tomorrow is the sabbath once again. Perhaps this time, if you are more careful in your penance, you will find the grace of God waiting for you at the top of the mountain. Now, though, you should rest!" And he slapped his hands on the table, and headed off to bed.

Remembering how long the journey took him before, the traveller set out somewhat earlier. As he clambered up the rocky slope, with his pack slung over one shoulder and a stick to help him on his way, he turned his head often to judge the position of the sun, and slow down when necessary. On one bend in the path he sat down altogether; after a few minutes, belatedly, he mumbled a prayer. As he lifted himself over the final brow in the path he found himself before the stone cross. He marvelled at its smoothness: clinted and griked in its shape, but polished beyond the point of weatherwearing as if once held by a divine hand. But tiredness as much as holiness made him drop in front of it, and he lay there for some time, before rising despondently and turning back towards the tavern. Loose stones and gravel scattered before him, making him stumble a little, and all he wanted to do was to throw himself, first into the horse's trough, and then into his bed.

The innkeeper was leaning on a hoe in the garden in front of the tavern, and he prompted the traveller with a simple: "So?" The traveller had to confess that, once again, he had failed to find God at the holy stone cross.

"Did you say a prayer at every bend?" asked the innkeeper. "Didn't I see you rest a while out by the ridge?"

The traveller had to confess, to the innkeeper's disappointment: "I did rest, but I said a prayer before I set off again."

At this, the innkeeper shook his head. "You did not say your prayers properly. You must not rest first, but pray first. See to God before you see to yourself. But there is always next sabbath, if you wish to stay here until then."

The traveller agreed that he would continue with board and work at the tavern until the next sabbath. Once more he spent the days preceding it in working for the innkeeper. Once more the innkeeper found him task after task, which the innkeeper found easier after the fourth day when an old, toothless farmer turned up at the tavern. First the traveller was given the task of

feeding now two horses, and then he chopped wood from the few trees that dotted the shadier slopes of nearby hills. He helped in cooking simple food for the farmer, who explained that the rest of the villagers were on their way, as he had set out early owing to his advanced years. Frequently the innkeeper and the farmer would drink late into the night, while the traveller (exhausted from his day's work) went to bed. But every day, however tired he became, the traveller cast a glance up to the hill with its cross atop.

Sabbath's eve arrived a third time, and the traveller was resting, while the innkeeper poured wine for the farmer. Outside the horses whinnied at scents carried on the wind, interrupting the quiet of the evening. The innkeeper nudged the farmer and then said to the traveller. "Tomorrow is the Lord's day again. Perhaps this time, if you take more care over your prayers, you will learn a great truth from the top of the mountain. Now, though, you should get some sleep." And he poured wine for himself, and the traveller considered himself dismissed.

Remembering his past fatigues, the traveller drank deeply from the trough of water before he set out, and packed all his belongings so that he might most easily heft them up the mountainside. As he picked his way over the path that he now knew very well, he tried to remember all the contingencies on his penance. He said his prayers promptly at each turn in the path, and judged well the time it would take him to reach the top of the mountain. As he approached the cross for the third time, he chanced to look over his shoulder at the valley below. He could see the tavern and the horses in the distance, and the innkeeper and the farmer were stood in the vegetable patch next to the building.

Though it was a long way from the valley to the summit, the traveller's youthful eyes were keen, and he could tell that both figures were looking at the mountain; indeed, they both had their heads raised and could have been looking straight at him. As the traveller continued to watch the two older men, the farmer turned to his companion and slapped him on the arm. He said something, and pointed up at where the traveller was standing. At the end of the farmer's speech, both men seemed to rock and sway.

At seeing this, the traveller learned a great truth about his fellow man. As he began to appreciate this truth, he knew in his heart that he was no longer the young boy that had left his homeland. He shouldered his pack into a more comfortable position, took one last glance at the innkeeper and the farmer; he turned away from the cross and the summit, and away from the tavern and the valley; older, wiser, sadder, the traveller began his long walk home.

What does anyone genuinely desire?

Stones and bones run deep and buried. Intuition calcifies, sinks and becomes dense rock, warmed by the sun or the blood. Stones and bones are the truth, wrapped in well-meaning, stupid nature.

Each primal urge faces its opposite: one is from the bones through the heart, the other is from the stones through the head. Or both are bony, bent out of shape by the hidden, tripped-over stone.

The stone is money; the bone is sex. The stone is house; the bone is home. The stone is death; the bone is also death.

It is recommended that this slim volume be read in a single sitting.

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