

A ROCK

By DONALD MITCHELL

WHY WE LIKE IT: *When it comes to distinguishing between a writer and a writer, a sure-fire test is to see what they do with the most mundane subject matter. With the former all you get is typing; with the latter you stand before a miracle. 'A Rock' is surely that. According to the author it was a long time coming, but the wait was worth it. Every word of the liquid prose crystallizes into passages of spellbinding beauty and we love the way the narrator seamlessly slips from the physical into the metaphysical. What starts out as an intellectual inquiry evolves into a meditation on the nature of Being. The rock is both image and symbol, separate from us but the same. Quote: 'A vast reef of shining coral has grown over her lids. It's as if, surrounded for ages by such tender and forgiving beauty, she could no longer bear ordinary sight. Somehow I recognize her as the voice of the rock. I feel her words rise...Most of can only dream of writing this well.*

I found a rock. It's almost perfectly rectangular and about the size of a bar of soap. It looked out of place where it rested, sitting in an ancient rut on the old skidder road. It sat there quiet, as any rock would, but it's not like any rock I've ever seen. So I couldn't just leave it on the moss and mud. I had to pick it up and stare at it all the way down the mountain.

It's not even the shape so much but what's all over it. Or *throughout* it. White, zig-zaggy quartz veins crisscross each other on all sides like zippers made of frost, and the zippers dive down into the dark body which is opaque green. I say opaque, and it *is*, but more like the night is opaque—it seems to flux and wobble as if something inside the darkness is trying to free itself.

I felt compelled to draw it. I took it up to my room, found a pencil I hadn't used since middle school and on the back of a bank receipt came up with a kind of cartoon fish—a *deep sea* cartoon fish. It made me laugh and gave me the shivers. The rock is funny like that and serious too, soaked with dark and outrageous mystery.

I've already thrown away the drawing but I can't let go of the rock. Some of the icy stripes, it's true, are thick and heavy like reef scars on whale skin, or like the jagged fractures in tree bark; I feel a powerful and uncomfortable dignity seeping out through those half-mended wounds. In fact, I think the rock might heal something in me. Or make me go insane. It's so beautifully and abhorrently odd.

I didn't want to admit this, but if I stare long enough between the lines into the dark green matrix of the rock, it shatters alive into portraits and scenes. Yes, I see them there, as supernally real and inexplicable as UFO sightings, but they seem to come from a place very deep and darkly human—they seem to come from way back in our past and way out into a future that may or may not be ours.

Honestly, on one side of the rock I believe I can see all the way through to the century before last, or even the one before that. There's a man in deer skin. His head is turned slightly away but I can make out a deep gash on his scalp, right at the widow's peak—as if some Iroquois or French trapper has tried to make some extra fur. It looks painful but the man seems okay. I think he wishes the mark to pass down to his descendants, that it might be a star on the brow of their heavens forever. That it will say a lasting word against the inevitability of a programmed extinction.

And there's a Pharaoh who hasn't been reborn yet, sleeping under his dune of golden sand, lying on his bed of sapphire and quartz. He's thinking about the right curse, a fresh one for every unit of Planck

time, ready for the exact instant his tomb will be pried open. And there's a woman: she lies under the ocean and her eyes are shut tight. A vast reef of shining coral has grown over her lids. It's as if, surrounded for ages by such tender and unforgiving beauty, she could no longer bear ordinary sight. Somehow I recognize her as the voice of the rock. I feel her words rise—now a lump in my throat.

The little stele of rock is speaking through me, I suppose, trying to explain itself. *It was all invented so long ago, it says, and will continue for such a long time after the world is finished.* That's hard to really grasp, that I'll die and the rock will go on living, getting smaller and smaller, as rocks do, until one day it will be less than a grain of sand, less than a fleck of dry clay. I try to imagine a rock so small, so many ages beyond my reckoning, imbedded in a tiny cell—maybe in the cell of a deep sea fish.

And I know it will get smaller yet, beyond the siren's call of gravity by which even light is charmed. It will find itself wiped clean of this universe. What will have taken over by then, I wonder? What other calculation necessary?

Sometimes this life is only a flicker of déjà vu: suddenly we're impossibly aware of too much too late. It feels like this to me as I carry the rock back up the mountain, to the moss and the mud and the rut, and return it to its way.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *I've hammered away at 'A Rock' for over ten years now so I don't have a clear memory of my intent. I've found lots of funny pebbles, cobbles and boulders but never had the urge to ink anything about them; that one was different somehow. I remember the rock just appearing to me on the logging road as out of a lucid dream. And there have been more than a few instances during that decade of hammering. I would say the most direct and personal influence was from Ursula Le Guin, with whom I shared a long, sweet, always lively and occasionally fierce correspondence until her death early last year. I sent a version of this piece to her a few years back and she sent me her own little story of a rock's painstaking, glorious evolution. That exchange contributed much to later versions.*

Personally, 'A Rock', allows me, for a minute or so, to leave our species' parting gift, The Holocene Extinction, in time's refulgent dust.

BIO: Donald James Mitchell lives in Deming, WA, a tiny town in the footholds of the North Cascades. His work has been published in various literary journals including *River Teeth*, *Moss*, *The Boiler*, *Four Ties Lit Review* and others.