

CHANGING THE STONE

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In Austria, even the shells of hard-boiled eggs don't seem to peel as they did in Australia. In the part of Austria where I live, the houses are different too. They were built long ago and, to prevent the heart from being trodden, from blocks of granite. Still today, someone who builds a good stonewall is a respected craftsman.

I lived several years between stonewalls over a meter thick and my closest friends lived in an old, renovated stone mill. It was in the mill one day that I heard something interesting from another visitor. The man had recently met some Aboriginal people near Adelaide, in the southern part of the Australian continent and they had told him that members of their tribe would not break stone. I pondered over this information in the ensuing months, wondering if the man had heard right and, if so, how had the people made their spearheads if they would not break stone.

I had always been drawn to stone. A favourite childhood pastime was to gather pebbles from the beach and quartz treasures from the roadside. In later years, it was also the work on the stone that fascinated me. I feasted my eyes on the silent images gracing the temples of Ancient Greece, wondering whose hands had picked up the fire and the tools to chisel those smiling goddesses and racing centaurs. In Venice, I stroked the coloured marble columns of St. Marco's Cathedral whilst musing on the phrase, „I am the stone“. Sculptors or poets entering deeper stages of the work, whereby the material is confused with the self, surely know well the meaning of these words

After some years living in Austria, I decided to turn my interest in stone into a more substantial research. I began a comparative study on the differences between cutting and breaking, including, as a basis, the laws of movement and placement. One of my study documents described how, earlier in this century, a large quantity of certain stones were taken from Bosnia and Herzegovina and brought to Austria to be used for building. These were quite large and weighed several tons each. In the Middle Ages, esoteric Christians known as the Bogomils had cut them into crosses, miniature houses and sarcophagus. The surfaces of these forms were carved with deer and dancers, snakes and suns, or figures with giant right hands raised to the heavens. These were magnificent examples of stone, yet other writers informed that the size was not always important. Even the movement of one tiny pebble may cause a wide and wondrous ripple of events as it passes from hand to hand.

The conversation in the stone mill about the Aboriginal people brought a forgotten event to my consciousness. I remembered when I, too, had had an exchange with a tribe in South Australia. I had been travelling with a group of friends one summer and we were returning to camp from a day trip to a salt lake when an interesting group of gum trees appeared, about a quarter of a mile from the roadside. My eyes turned to meet those of one of my companions and we silently agreed that it would be a good place to inspect. The other friend who was driving sensed this and she stopped the car to let us out, remaining behind with her young son.

We made our way to the trees and the nearer we stepped towards them, the lighter we felt. Our destination turned out to be a large sandy pit in which were the gum trees, various desert grasses and some interesting little stones. I had the feeling these stones bore the marks of human hands as they looked something like one of my precious belongings - a stone, which an Elder from a more distant tribe told me had been cut. However, there was nothing of importance here. Only chips strew the ground and the breeze held a lovely atmosphere like the laughter of many children playing in the sand.

After some time of happy exploration the faint sound of the car horn made itself heard. We were not ready to leave and it even seemed wrong to do so. However, as the beeping became more insistent, we quickly gathered some of the stones and ran back. We drove for not more than half a minute when the car broke down and came to a halt. Everyone got out, the boy treading on a cactus prickle, which caused him to scream loudly. Again my eyes met those of my companion's. 'We'd better go and put those stones back', we both said at the same time.

As before, the nearer we got to the place the happier we felt, but even more so this time. Now there were not only children, but a whole crowd to meet us, and strangely enough, it no longer mattered if the stones stayed or went. What was important was our return and recognition of unseen spirits. The Dark Skinned Ones who had once lived there, although invisible, were still present. My friend and I stood under the blazing blue desert sky and honoured them; we loved them and were loved by them. Our departure this time was free and our footsteps filled with the happy meeting. The car started easily and the boy was content.

Later in life, when my tracks led me from the starry peripheral lands to the heart of the world, I found that the narrow ways of Europe nudge and form her peoples differently to those of the Australian desert. Spending the night in an old stone mill or a castle from the Middle Ages is quite another proposition than that of sleeping by a fire under the open sky.

In Europe, I learnt the laws of building stonewalls. The way to make a good wall is to know which stone to put where. Best is that your hands know how to pick up the

right stone for the next place to be filled. Some walls have been so strongly made that it is hard to believe that they could ever have been broken. And yet it happens; ruined castles are found all over the place. When I first came and saw the great moats, city walls and towers of the past, I had to wonder how these solid and powerful constructions had met with such disastrous ends. I examined the stones of the ruins, trying to distinguish marks of weather from marks of war.

My research began to take me into existential realms and I started hearing the groans of people and of stones as more and more material accrued on my desk. Breaking emerged as a powerful theme when I began to investigate its origins. I found it to be a necessary part of creation. In its right place perhaps it could be called caring destruction and it demanded presence on the part of the perpetrator. The artist takes a risk cutting virgin stone. The problem of destruction was when it lost the balance with creation and outweighed the latter, when it started ruling instead of serving. This happened when consciousness was lost and it was manifested as senseless action or lack of mastery, when not actually evil. It seemed that the relationship between the types of destruction was a path of learning and as individual as people are. One day, as I was grappling with these thoughts on the place of destruction in the transformative process, the following piece of writing appeared at my doorstep. There was no signature to say who it was from.

The White Castle

There was once a renowned and wonderful white castle and it came to pass that the birthday of the youngest princess was taking place within its walls. Flags and banners were flying high and the doors were opened to many visitors, some of whom had travelled immense distances to be there. During the days, singers sang their joys and sorrows, and tournaments were seriously and playfully fought. The sun shone brightly overhead although it had been grey for the previous weeks. In the evenings, wonderful food decked the table in an enormous banquet hall lit by candles and warmed by several fires.

One night, after a sumptuous feast, the tables were cleared as usual to make way for dancing and music. This was one of many nights of gaiety, but was particularly special as it was the actual day of the princess's birth. Everyone wore their best and the poets were in excellent form.

The princess was not so young that her eyes didn't fall on the visiting knights. She was a slightly nervous soul who normally locked her door at night. Later that night, however, when the revels were dying down, she was extremely daring and left her door unlocked rather hoping that the letter given to a young lord during the dance might take its effect. In her excitement she left the key in the lock outside.

There's a traitor in every crowd. This one followed the particular young lord on his way upstairs to the princess and slew him from behind. He saw the key and turned it, then made his way downstairs again and gave his disguised men the word to begin the attack. The king reacted with the quickness of a man used to such things and signalled for the gates to be closed. This sparked off an immediate response from a large number of troops who has been hidden outside. It was an affair bloody beyond expectation, takeover was impossible and the king was killed with the traitor. The princess, locked in her room, was forgotten. Her room, however, was protected by the thickest stonewalls in the whole castle.

After some days when the sound of fighting could no longer be heard, the princess gathered her wits and courage about her. Knotting the silk bedding together, she tied it to the windowsill and lowered herself into the morning light of the courtyard below. All the lords and ladies, children and staff, were dead and gone. Gone, too, were the sweet-eyed horses and fine hunting dogs. Objects of beauty and homeliness were shattered and burnt and the skilfully wrought tapestries were still smoking. Where the banquet and dancing had taken place, fire-blackened and broken stones lay about in a great silence.

It was here that the princess lived for the next years. She ate fish from the castle lake and vegetables which she grew from seeds and roots found in the storage rooms. The betrayal had been such a horror in the land that no people would approach the castle for a long, long time. Even merchants chose longer routes to avoid it.

Several years later, an old man who used to tend the castle well and fishponds, decided to return and see what remained of the place. He felt he just could not let his last days go by otherwise. After a journey of several weeks on a donkey, which was almost as old as he was, he arrived at the main gateway. He dismounted and walked with a beating heart through the entrance. The walls were broken and black, but round about them were pretty beds of neatly planted flowers, food grasses, vegetables and herbs. Birds were hopping about unafraid of his presence and fish were leaping playfully in the nearby ponds. The princess, a little older, but the more beautiful for her handiwork, stood astonished in the courtyard.

Since the old man was the first person she had spoken with for all these years, their words of greeting were filled with tenderness and wonder. Then, seeing that he was weary from his journey, she served him a rich and nourishing soup from the best products of her garden. As soon as he was revived, he began the task of clearing out the well of his old home.

When his work was done, they set off on a journey together. He knew all the ways and could take her to places where she received the help she needed to return

and rebuild the ruins. This time she didn't choose a young lord whilst on her travels, but rather a stonemason.



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