

## Brenda Riches / FOUR PROSE PIECES

### STONE

It's a piece of sedimentary rock, she says.

What's that? I ask, hoping I sound interested.

All rock is volcanic in origin, molten from the earth's interior.  
Sedimentary rock is pulverised particles eroded from volcanic rock.

*I am touching stone that came from the flaring of the earth.*

I pour her tea. Please go on.

Volcanic rock cracks and water gets in. The water freezes, causing a piece to break away. As it gradually moves downhill it gets smaller and smaller. It ends up in the sea or a river. Vagaries of water fashion the stone. See these white craters? She touches them lightly. They are caused by the calcareous bits of small animals.

Calcareous?

The lime remains of the skeleton. They dissolve, leaving a gap in the stone.

Like the ice I put into candle molds, I tell her. The wax sets around it and then it melts and the water leaks away leaving holes that the light can shine through.

Exactly like that, she agrees.

*Rock. Molten soft from the raging earth, spilling white from the mountain's crack. Sliding. Cooling. Setting.*

*And me with my mountains home-made.*

*Take one empty milk carton. Hang string from a rod across its neck. Pack it with ice. Pour on liquid wax, crayon coloured. Take another carton. Repeat. Another. Line up a spectrum in the fridge. When set, cut away the cardboard. Release the flood. Vagaries of wax. Rainbows to burn.*

What about this tiny stone that's stuck in the larger hole, the hole that goes all the way through?

That stone was rammed in by the force of the waves. You couldn't get rid of it if you tried.

*Stone trapped inside stone.*

Cake crumbs catch at the corners of her mouth. She dabs them off with the fine linen napkin I keep for these occasions. She has reached a silence that seems to be waiting. And I want her to go on.

Where did you find it?

I used to go fossicking on the beach.

Fossicking?

Yes. Scrounging around. Turning things over. I once found a beautiful green stone at Tiree.

Where's that?

In the Hebrides. The beach faces the Atlantic.

*Atlantis.*

I kept the stone in my coat pocket. It was my fiddling stone. After a year it wasn't there any more. Then we were holidaying in France and Angus found this one and ran up to me, saying, 'Mum, here's a new fiddling stone for you.' That beach faces the Atlantic too.

*Vanished rock*

I've had this stone a year. You have it now. Keep it as long as you want.

*She needs to let it go. She's had it for a year.*

Won't you miss it?

Let me have it back some time.

No lingering in her eyes when she speaks. Takes her time over a second cup. Stands and chats in the hall before she pulls on her gloves and leaves.

A thin person crossing the street.

\* \* \*

The best place for the stone was on the open shelf in the kitchen. I had to stand on a stool to put it up there. Next to the shell. As soon as I had placed it I saw they were both discoloured. Fellows in dishevelment. And the shelf was sticky with kitchen dust. Having once noticed it I had to clean it off (though I'd been aware of its possible existence for some days.) I wiped it with a soapy cloth. The bubbled streaks needed two rinsings. Then I was sorry. The shell and the stone sat abject on that shiny veneer.

I put the tea things in the sink and turned the hot tap full on. Her cup was just under the jet, and the water hit hard on the bottom of it and rebounded in a powerful spray, soaking the glass of the window before I could think to turn off the tap. I watched trees through smears of water, water that coursed erratic down to the wooden frame.

\* \* \*

*Shell. Thrown up by the sea. Left high for the water's thrashing.  
Soughing back into sleep.*

Thom found me that shell. Thom who put things into my hands. Like burdens and gifts. He knew when it was time to leave the beach. Twilight changes the appearance of water, he said. Says I'm a hoarder.

I collect things. My shelves sag. Shells, stones, cracked china, origins and deaths. They might come in handy. They're not in the way, are they, high up on my shelves where dust gathers.

I burn my candles. Wait till wax pools onto the table. While it's still soft I print my fingers onto it. The lines of my skin are whorls of water. I burn more. I leave it till it sets hard so I can pluck it off and press it for the cooling of my hands. My fiddling wax.

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She came to tea again the following week. Talked long about the arrangements she'd made in the event of her death. Sat with hands folded neatly over her dark skirt, moving only to lift her cup. She put on one of her smiles, then removed it. Her face smoothed out over her organised death.

*Atlantis. Sinking under calm water. Gone.*

What should I do with your stone if you die before I return it?

'Throw it back, she said. Pulled on her smile, and held her cup steady.



## ARARAT

Moonset, and Janis leaves her house behind. Night thins in the faraway low sky she faces. Darkness catches at her, here in her garden. She walks, feet black-trailing the lawn's damp. Flowers enter her breathing deep to fill her lungs with lilac, with dogwood.

Like thunderclouds, bushes rounded, rolling into each other. Leaves vapory cover closed buds ready to break. Janis tugs off one twig. Two buds on this stem. Picked to stem their opening.

"Isn't it enough that stars unfurl constantly all over all of the sky too far away no stalks to root them? Some whiteness must remain husked."

The sky she faces spreads paler.

A pool. This side, not where the bushes grow. Stones rough as salt. Warm black earthsmell. Tiny flowers between needles of leaf. A rank dimness of weed. There Janis pauses. Considers the dreams of fish.

"Do they shine down there where stems flesh the still water? Are their bodies rainbows, promises of war? Is their night a wide-eyed staring at events without shadow? Do their mouths move in sleep?"

An absence of birds weights the garden. No leaves stir on the trees that hold her territory from the changing sky. Firs to keep the light, to lay shadow over her weeping birch. She parts its branches, dropping frayed ropes. Walks through. Holds the tree. Sapsmell, sticky. Her face to its trunk, its thin slotted lines on her cheeks.

Behind the firs light grows to shade them more darkly.

Her path is cracked stone. But she wears soft shoes and makes no more sound than the going moon.

She stops again at the open gate. Fills her hands with its cold metal, curving her palms over intricate scrolls, twisting small fingers in rings that don't quite close.

The upper rim of sun is a wire glinting.

"Soon it will be a barbed noose to loop the day's fire."

She leaves the gate behind.

Flowers now come back to the day. A gravel walk, banked by daisies, tall and serried, saffron circles, petals radiant white. And dandelions opening wide to catch tatters of sunlight. She moves between them, past clamorous birds whose throats tremble clear as dew. Through the wild rose hedge. Thorny. Petalsmell. She sits till the sun is complete.

"Sunlight nets the body of the river. If I cross, will I tangle in silver strings?"

Feet in the shallows raise sand. Knees nudge water, flurrying. Thighs push to ripple a way open.

Smooth and still day lies over the land. Should she rest now?

"So close the highway's tall poles bar the sky. Touch the warm and humming wood."

She leaves her wet shoes by the river.

The poles' shadows have retreated. She walks on burning asphalt, the sun following. At length she turns.

In a distant shimmer of land her dark house floating.

## UNTITLED

Petal by petal the apple tree is losing blossoms. The wind has broken them apart. White by white the tree loses.

One petal is caught on a spider's web. It turns slowly around its own weight.

I took you up to this tree and made you watch it. I made you stay there till the last petal had left its branch. I took your hands and pressed them to the bark of the tree.

What does it feel like?

Old thoughts, you said, ready to peel away. The lining of your skull.

I told you it was my skin you were touching. You wanted to pull your hands away but I kept them there.

Till your hands gnarled.

## MUSICIAN

Musician, when your hands moved over strings did you  
see disease waste your fingers?

While you played, did you watch on the wall the shadow of your  
cancerous dead mother? Of your uncle's head swelling malignant?

*Fingering he lets song from string from ivory touches to stroke chords  
alive. He is instrument to this body's tune, the heart of it.*

Musician, hear the yellow clover that springs alongside hard highways  
lilt yellow your making. Not black plumes on the bridles of slow  
horses. Sunlight your sound gold soaked in young wheat thick with  
bladeleaf.