

# On A Raised Beach

(To James H. Whyte)

Hugh MacDiarmid



All is lithogenesis — or lochia,  
Carpelite fruit of the forbidden tree,  
Stones blacker than any in the Caaba,  
Cream-coloured caen-stone, chatoyant pieces,  
Celadon and corbeau, bistre and beige,  
Glaucous, hoar, enfoudered, cyathiform,  
Making mere faculae of the sun and moon,  
I study you glout and gloss, but have  
No cadrans to adjust you with, and turn again  
From optik to haptik and like a blind man run  
My fingers over you, arris by arris, burr by burr,  
Slickensides, truité, rugas, foveoles,  
Bringing my aesthesis in vain to bear,  
An angle-titch to all your corrugations and coigns,  
Hatched foraminous cavo-rilievo of the world,  
Deictic, fiducial stones. Chiliad by chiliad  
What bricole piled you here, stupendous cairn?  
What artist poses the Earth écorché thus,  
Pillar of creation engouled in me?  
What eburnation augments you with men's bones,  
Every energumen an Endymion yet?  
All the other stones are in this haecceity it seems,  
But where is the Christophanic rock that moved?  
What Cabirian song from this catasta comes?

Deep conviction or preference can seldom  
Find direct terms in which to express itself.  
Today on this shingle shelf  
I understand this pensive reluctance so well,  
This not discommendable obstinacy,  
These contrivances of an inexpressive critical feeling,  
These stones with their resolve that Creation shall not be  
Injured by iconoclasts and quacks. Nothing has stirred  
Since I lay down this morning an eternity ago  
But one bird. The widest open door is the least liable to intrusion,  
Ubiquitous as the sunlight, unfrequented as the sun.  
The inward gates of a bird are always open.

It does not know how to shut them.  
That is the secret of its song,  
But whether any man's are ajar is doubtful.  
I look at these stones and know little about them,  
But I know their gates are open too,  
Always open, far longer open, than any bird's can be,  
That every one of them has had its gates wide open far longer  
Than all birds put together, let alone humanity,  
Though through them no man can see,  
No man nor anything more recently born than themselves  
And that is everything else on the Earth.  
I too lying here have dismissed all else.  
Bread from stones is my sole and desperate dearth,  
From stones, which are to the Earth as to the sunlight  
Is the naked sun which is for no man's sight.  
I would scorn to cry to any easier audience  
Or, having cried, to lack patience to await the response.  
I am no more indifferent or ill-disposed to life than death is;  
I would fain accept it all completely as the soil does;  
Already I feel all that can perish perishing in me  
As so much has perished and all will yet perish in these stones.  
I must begin with these stones as the world began.

Shall I come to a bird quicker than the world's course ran?  
    To a bird, and to myself, a man?  
    And what if I do, and further?  
I shall only have gone a little way to go back again  
And be like a fleeting deceit of development,  
Iconoclasts, quacks. So these stones have dismissed  
All but all of evolution, unmoved by it,  
(Is there anything to come they will not likewise dismiss?)  
As the essential life of mankind in the mass  
Is the same as their earliest ancestors yet.

Actual physical conflict or psychological warfare  
    Incidental to love or food  
Brings out animals life's bolder and more brilliant patterns  
    Concealed as a rule in habitude.  
    There is a sudden revelation of colour,  
    The protrusion of a crest,  
    The expansion of an ornament,  
– But no general principle can be guessed  
From these flashing fragments we are seeing,  
These foam-bells on the hidden currents of being.  
The bodies of animals are visible substances  
And must therefore have colour and shape, in the first place

Depending on chemical composition, physical structure, mode of  
growth,  
Physiological rhythms and other factors in the case,  
But their purposive function is another question.  
Brilliant-hued animals hide away in the ocean deeps;  
The mole as a rich sexual colouring in due season  
Under the ground; nearly every beast keeps  
Brighter colours inside it than outside.  
What the seen shows is never anything to what it's designated to hide,  
The read blood which makes the beauty of a maiden's cheek  
Is as red under a gorilla's pigmented and hairy face.  
Varied forms and functions through life may seem to have shown  
They all come back to the likeness of a stone,  
So to the intervening stages we can best find a clue  
In what we all came from and return to.  
There are no twirly bits in this ground bass.

We must be humble. We are so easily baffled by appearances  
And do not realise that these stones are one with the stars.  
It makes no difference to them whether they are high or low,  
Mountain peak or ocean floor, palace, or pigsty.  
There are plenty of ruined buildings in the world but no ruined  
stones.

No visitor comes from the stars  
But is the same as they are.  
– Nay, it is easy to find a spontaneity here,  
An adjustment to life, and ability  
To ride it easily, akin to 'the buoyant  
Prelapserian naturalness of a country girl  
Laughing in the sun, not passion-rent,  
But sensing in the bound of her breasts vigours to come  
Powered to make her one with the stream of earthlife round her,  
But not yet as my Muse is, with this ampler scope,  
This more divine rhythm, wholly at one  
With the earth, riding the Heavens with it, as the stones do  
And all soon must.  
But it is wrong to indulge in these illustrations  
Instead of just accepting the stones.  
It is a paltry business to try to drag down  
The arduus furor of the stones to the futile imaginings of men,  
To all that fears to grow roots into the common earth,  
As it soon must, lest it be chilled to the core,  
As it will be — and none the worse for that.  
Impatience is a poor qualification for immortality.  
Hot blood is of no use in dealing with eternity.  
It is seldom that promises or even realisations

Can sustain a clear and a searching gaze.  
But an emotion chilled is an emotion controlled;  
That is the road leading to certainty,  
Reasoned planning for the time when reason can no longer avail.  
It is essential to know the chill of all objections  
That come creeping into the mind, the battle between opposing  
    ideas  
Which gives the victory to the strongest and most universal  
Over all others, and to wage it to the end  
With increasing freedom, precision, and detachment  
A detachment that shocks our instincts and ridicules our desires.  
All else in the world cancels out, equal, capable  
Of being replaced by other things (even as all the ideas  
That madden men now must lose their potency in a few years  
And be replaced by others – even as all the religions,  
All the material sacrifices and moral restraints,  
That in twenty thousand years have brought us no nearer to God  
Are irrelevant to the ordered adjustments  
Out of reach of perceptive understanding  
Forever taking place on the Earth and in the unthinkable regions  
    around it;  
This cat's cradle of life; this reality volatile yet determined;  
This intense vibration in the stones  
That makes them seem immobile to us)  
But the world cannot dispense with the stones.  
They alone are not redundant. Nothing can replace them  
Except a new creation of God.

I must get into this stone world now.  
Ratchel, striae, relationships of tesserae,  
    Innumerable shades of grey,  
    Innumerable shapes,  
And beneath them all a stupendous unity,  
Infinite movement visibly defending itself  
Against all the assaults of weather and water,  
Simultaneously mobilised at full strength  
At every point of the universal front,  
    Always at the pitch of its powers,  
    The foundation and end of all life.  
I try them with the old Norn words – hraun,  
Duss, rønis, queedaruns, kollyarum;  
They hvarf from me in all directions  
Over the hurdifell – klett, millya hellya, hellyina bretta,  
Hellyina wheeda, hellyina grø, bakka, ayre, –  
    And lay my world in kolgref.

This is no heap of broken images.  
Let men find the faith that builds mountains  
Before they seek the faith that moves them. Men cannot hope  
To survive the fall of the mountains  
Which they will no more see than they saw their rise  
Unless there are more concentrated and determined,  
Truer to themselves and with more to be true to,  
Than these stones, and inerrable as they are.  
Their sole concern is that what can be shaken  
Shall be shaken and disappear  
And only the unshakeable be left.  
What hardihood in any man has part or parcel in the latter?  
It is necessary to make a stand and maintain it forever.  
These stones go through Man, straight to God, if there is one.  
What have they not gone through already?  
Empires, civilisations, aeons. Only in them  
If in anything, can His creations confront Him.  
They came so far out of the water and halted forever.  
That larking dallier, the sun, has only been able to play  
With superficial by-products since;  
The moon moves the waters backwards and forwards,  
But the stones cannot be lured an inch farther  
Either on this side of eternity or the other.  
Who thinks God is easier to know than they are?  
Trying to reach men any more, any otherwise, than they are?  
These stones will reach us long before we reach them.  
Cold, undistracted, eternal and sublime.  
They will stem all the torrents of vicissitude forever  
With a more than Roman peace.

Death is a physical horror to me no more.  
I am prepared with everything else to share  
Sunshine and darkness and wind and rain  
And life and death bare as these rocks though it be  
In whatever order nature may decree,  
But, not indifferent to the struggle yet  
Nor to the ataraxia I might get  
By fatalism, a deeper issue see  
Than these, or suicide, here confronting me.  
It is reality that is at stake.  
Being and non-being with equal weapons here  
Confront each other for it, non-being unseen  
But always on the point, it seems, of showing clear,  
Though its reserved contagion may breed  
This fancy too in my still susceptible head

And then by its own hidden movement lead  
 Me as by aesthetic vision to be supposed  
 Point where by death's logic everything is recomposed,  
 Object and image one, from their severance freed,  
 As I sometimes, still wrongly, feel 'twixt this storm beach and me.  
 What happens to us  
 Is irrelevant to the world's geology  
 But what happens to the world's geology  
 Is not irrelevant to us.  
 We must reconcile ourselves to the stones,  
 Not the stones to us.  
 Here a man must shed the encumbrances that muffle  
 Contact with elemental things, the subtleties  
 That seem inseparable from a humane life, and go apart  
 Into a simple and sterner, more beautiful and more oppressive  
     world,  
 Austerely intoxicating; the first draught is overpowering;  
 Few survive it. It fills me with a sense of perfect form,  
 The end seen from the beginning, as in a song.  
 It is no song that conveys the feeling  
 That there is no reason why it should ever stop,  
 But the kindred form I am conscious of here  
 Is the beginning and end of the world,  
 The unsearchable masterpiece, the music of the spheres,  
 Alpha and Omega, the Omnific Word.  
 These stones have the silence of supreme creative power,  
 The direct and undisturbed way of working  
 Which alone leads to greatness.  
 What experience has any man crystallised,  
 What weight of conviction accumulated,  
 What depth of life suddenly seen entire  
 In some high supernatural moment  
 And made a symbol and lived up to  
 With such resolution, such Spartan impassivity?  
 It is a frenzied and chaotic age,  
 Like a growth of weeds on the site of a demolished building.  
 How shall we set ourselves against it,  
 Imperturbable, inscrutable, in the world and yet not in it,  
     Silent under the torments it inflicts upon us,  
         With a constant centre,  
 With a single inspiration, foundations firm and invariable;  
     By what immense exercise of will,  
 Inconceivable discipline, courage and endurance,  
     Self-purification and anti-humanity,  
         Be ourselves without interruption,  
             Adamantine and inexorable?

It will be ever increasingly necessary to find  
In the interests of all mankind  
Men capable of rejecting all that all other men  
Think, as a stone remains  
Essential to the world, inseparable from it,  
And rejects all other life yet.  
Great work cannot be combined with surrender to the crowd.

– Nay, the truth we seek is as free  
From all yet thought as a stone from humanity.  
Here where there is neither haze nor hesitation  
Something at least of the necessary power has entered into me.  
I have still to see any manifestation of the human spirit  
That is worthy of a moment's longer exemption than it gets  
From petrification again – to get out if it can.  
All is lithogenesis – or lochia;  
And I can desire nothing better,  
An immense familiarity with other men's imaginings  
Convinces me that they cannot either  
(If they could, it would instantly be granted  
– The present order must continue till then)  
Though, of course, I still keep an open mind,  
A mind as open as the grave.  
You may say the truth cannot be crushed out,  
That the weight of the whole world may be tumbled on it,  
And yet, in puny, distorted, phantasmal shapes albeit,  
It will braird again; it will force its way up  
Through unexpectable fissures? look over this beach.  
What ruderal and rupestrine growth is here?  
What crop confirming any credulities?  
Conjure a fescue to teach me with from this  
And I will listen to you, but until then  
Listen to me – Truth is not crushed;  
It crushes, gorgonises all else into itself.  
The trouble is to know it when you see it?  
You will have no trouble with it when you do.  
Do not argue with me. Argue with these stones.  
Truth has no trouble in knowing itself.  
This is it. The hard fact. The inoppugnable reality,  
Here is something for you to digest.  
Eat this and we'll see what appetite you have left  
For a world hereafter.  
I pledge you in the first and last crusta,  
The rocks rattling in the bead-proof seas.

O we of little faith,  
As romanticists viewed the philistinism of their days  
As final and were prone to set over against it  
Infinite longing rather than manly will –  
Nay, as all thinkers and writers find  
The indifference of the masses of mankind, –  
So are most men with any stone yet,  
Even those who juggle with lapidary's, mason's, geologist's words  
    And all their knowledge of stones in vain,  
Tho' these stones have far more differences in colour, shape and size  
Than most men to my eyes –  
Even those who develop precise conceptions to immense distances  
    Out of these bleak surfaces.  
All human culture is a Goliath to fall  
To the least of these pebbles withal.  
A certain weight will be added yet  
To the arguments of even the most foolish  
And all who speak glibly may rest assured  
That to better their oratory they will have the whole earth  
For a Demosthenean pebble to roll in their mouths.

I am enamoured of the desert at last,  
The abode of supreme serenity is necessarily a desert.  
My disposition is towards spiritual issues  
Made inhumanly clear; I will have nothing interposed  
Between my sensitiveness and the barren but beautiful reality;  
The deadly clarity of this 'seeing of a hungry man'  
Only traces of a fever passing over my vision  
Will vary, troubling it indeed, but troubling it only  
In such a way that it becomes for a moment  
Superhumanly, menacingly clear – the reflection  
Of a brightness through a burning crystal.  
A culture demands leisure and leisure presupposes  
A self-determined rhythm of life; the capacity for solitude  
Is its test; by that the desert knows us.  
It is not a question of escaping from life  
But the reverse – a question of acquiring the power  
To exercise the loneliness, the independence, of stones,  
And that only comes from knowing that our function remains  
However isolated we seem fundamental to life as theirs.  
    We have lost the grounds of our being,  
    We have not built on rock.  
Thinking of all the higher zones  
Confronting the spirit of man I know they are bare  
Of all so-called culture as any stone here;

Not so much of all literature survives  
As any wisp of scriota that thrives  
On a rock – (interesting though it may seem to be  
As de Bary's and Schwendener's discovery  
Of the dual nature of lichens, the partnership,  
Symbiosis, of a particular fungus and particular alga).  
These bare stones bring me straight back to reality.

I grasp one of them and I have in my grip  
The beginning and the end of the world,  
My own self, and as before I never saw  
The empty hand of my brother man,  
The humanity no culture has reached, the mob.  
Intelligentsia, our impossible and imperative job!

'Ah!' you say, 'if only one of these stones would move  
– Were it only an inch – of its own accord.

This is the resurrection we await,  
– The stone rolled away from the tomb of the Lord.

I know there is no weight in infinite space,  
No impermeability in infinite time,  
But it is as difficult to understand and have patience here  
As to know that the sublime

Is theirs no less than ours, no less confined  
To men than men's to a few men, the stars of their kind.'

(The masses too have begged bread from stones,  
From human stones, including themselves,  
And only got it, not from their fellow-men,  
But from stones such as these here – if then.)

Detached intellectuals, not one stone will move,  
Not the least of them, not a fraction of an inch. It is not  
The reality of life that is hard to know.

It is nearest of all and easiest to grasp,  
But you must participate in it to proclaim it.  
– I lift a stone; it is the meaning of life I clasp  
Which is death, for that is the meaning of death;  
How else does any man yet participate

In the life of a stone,  
How else can any man yet become  
Sufficiently at one with creation, sufficiently alone,  
Till as the stone that covers him he lies dumb  
And the stone at the mouth of his grave is not overthrown?

– Each of these stones on this raised beach,  
Every stone in the world,  
Covers infinite death, beyond the reach  
Of the dead it hides; and cannot be hurled  
Aside yet to let any of them come forth, as love

Once made a stone move  
(Though I do not depend on that  
My case to prove).  
So let us beware of death; the stones will have  
Their revenge; we have lost all approach to them,  
But soon we shall become as those we have betrayed,  
And they will seal us fast in our graves  
As our indifference and ignorance seals them;  
But let us not be afraid to die.  
No heavier and colder and quieter then,  
No more motionless, do stones lie  
In death than in life to all men.  
It is not more difficult in death than here  
– Though slow as the stones the powers develop  
To rise from the grave – to get a life worth having;  
And in death – unlike life – we lose nothing that is truly ours.  
Diallage of the world's debate, end of the long auxesis,  
Although no ébrillade of Pegasus can here avail,  
I prefer your enchorial characters – the futhorc of the future –  
To the hieroglyphics of all the other forms of Nature.  
Song, your apprentice encrinites, seems to sweep  
The Heavens with a last entrochal movement;  
And, with the same word that began it, closes  
Earth's vast epanadiplosis.

Source: MacDiarmid's Selected Poetry, eds. A. Riach and M. Grieve (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 2004).

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