

During the pandemic, people painted pebbles with pictures and messages to spread cheer

THE PERSISTENCE OF PEBBLES

We don't often give the humble pebble a second thought. We collect them from beaches and fields and admire their rounded shape, patterns and colours. But there's more interest in the simple pebble than you might think, and not just from geologists who use them to reconstruct ancient land masses and cyclical geological processes. During the pandemic, pebbles were adapted as messengers to spread cheer and express solidarity. Poets and writers adopted them as symbols of hope and persistence.

Pebbles survive change mostly unscathed, becoming ever smoother, ever more rounded after each erosion, each exhumation. It seems to me that it's the pebble as a symbol of permanence that's so interesting to people. This persistence seemed to inspire the painted pebbles that appeared during the pandemic, perhaps because they represent solidity and certainty. It's hard to take a walk in the country without seeing pebbles painted like houses, or ladybirds, or with National Health Service colours, placed

on walls or stowed under hedges. During the pandemic, 'comfort pebbles' were given to patients in hospitals with painted-on personal messages from family or comforting images. As something to do during the lockdowns, pebbles were painted by children and hidden for others to find, with photographs of 'found pebbles' posted on dedicated groups on social media. Hundreds of these stones have been sealed in cement in Cockermouth, Cumbria, to preserve this unique moment and the way that people responded.

On behalf of a Pebble

An inspiring lecture by the University of Oxford Professor of Poetry, Alice Oswald, *On behalf of a Pebble*, provides a fascinating insight into the way a poet uses the basic elements of nature – pebbles, water, trees – as symbols, to inspire the imagination, and to function as building blocks in poems. Oswald's recent books, such as the collection *Woods etc.* (2005), feature poems on stones and pebbles, and reveal a fascination with their persistence. In *Autobiography of a Stone*, for example, Oswald imagines herself as a pebble being endlessly rounded, being left after the earth is gone:

*But I am moving only very slowly
lasting out earth and
keeping my gift under darkness.*

In her Oxford lecture, Oswald expands on the idea of the persistence of the pebble, or as she says, its 'solid, dense and inscrutable' presence. She mentions the tonkori, a plucked string instrument played by the Ainu people of Hokkaidō, northern Japan. The tonkori's shape is said to resemble the human body, and a pebble is often placed within the cavity of the instrument because it is believed to give the instrument a soul. So, for the poet, the pebble has solidity and life beyond the present.

The Stone

A mesmerising short story, *The Stone*, by the American writer and poet Louise Erdrich, describes a girl who finds a large rounded pebble in a tree. She takes the stone as a silent supportive companion, a source of stability and comfort, an object that is unchanging and unchangeable. As she grows up, the stone accompanies her through a troubled, sometimes solitary life, always staying the same. In only a few lines does Erdrich tell the story of the stone itself – its billion-year origin, and how its strange shape and smoothness

attracted human beings to pick it up several times over the past ten thousand years. Eventually, the woman dies in her sleep beside the stone and dreams that the molecules of her body will join with the stone's molecules over and over in age after age – like the clasts of an ancient upland appearing over and over in ever-younger landscapes, or pebbles exposed in a muddy field.

Pebble

For geologists, the enduring nature of pebbles helps us to reconstruct past environments, drainage patterns and unroofing events of ancient continents, but others might be interested in or even comforted by them as symbols of longevity.

A poem, *Pebble*, by the Polish poet Zbigniew Herbert, provides perhaps the best articulation of this longevity – this idea that pebbles will outlast us. Herbert reflects on the solidity of the pebble, and how the humble pebble conceals a capacity to observe and even pass judgement on our stewardship of the planet from its unchanging viewpoint:

*Pebbles cannot be tamed
to the end they will look at us
with a calm and very clear eye*

Geologists know that pebbles are not forever, and, of course, they have no ability to judge, but the principle is clear: if there was a lasting judgement of our stewardship of the planet, what would it be? Would the 'clear eye' of the pebble judge us harshly or kindly?

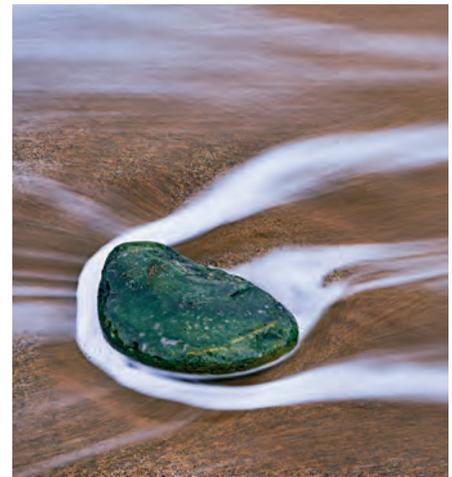
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Dedication

For my dad Jack Stephenson, who died last year.



DETAILS

ON BEHALF OF A PEBBLE

BY: Alice Oswald (2021). University of Oxford, Professor of Poetry Lecture.
www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZIFUyBaFnZM

WOODS ETC.

BY: Alice Oswald (2008). Faber & Faber.
64 pp. (pbk)
ISBN: 9780571233786 PRICE: £10.99
www.faber.co.uk/9780571233786-woods-etc.html

THE STONE

BY: Louise Erdrich (2019).
The New Yorker (Sept. 9 2019 issue & podcast)
www.newyorker.com/podcast/the-authors-voice/louise-erdrich-reads-the-stone

PEBBLE

BY: Zbigniew Herbert. Published in *Postwar Polish Poetry: New Expanded Edition*, edited by Czeslaw Milosz (University of California Press, 1983). 180 pp. Translated from the original Polish by Peter Dale Scott and Czeslaw Milosz.
ISBN: 978-0520044760
www.best-poems.net