

Rock Hounds

David Rompf

I.

On Kauai, the loveliest of the Hawaiian Islands, I've come to see a beach lined with steely industrial silos, barbed-wire fences and chained gates. Yards offshore, enormous, twisted pipes—factory discards—have been heaped into the ocean. This is not a beach for swimming or picnicking, and surfing is out of the question: slick black boulders and concrete ramparts protrude from the churning sea-foam. Yet, on this day, I've joined other pilgrims who stand or sit with their backs stooped, their fingers sifting sand.

Locals call it Glass Beach. Despite the unfortunate setting, it is the most enchanting of Kauai's beaches if you are a seeker of the blue, green, red, violet and clear pieces of ocean-smoothed glass that have washed up from the depths, turning the bleak cove into a jeweled shore. Nowhere else on the island can you find the phenomenon. Everywhere else, you can enjoy silky, golden-white stretches backed by expensive resorts or lush, guava-bearing hills. Few visitors to Glass Beach gaze at the water, and no one thinks of diving in. Instead, we cast our eyes to the ground in search of translucent stones. Beauty, for us, resides underfoot.

Years ago, a manufacturer dumped tons of bottles here—an affront, a sin—and the broken glass was swept into a marine cycle of grinding reduction. Pared down and burnished, the refined shards eventually ride the waves to shore. The tiniest ones, if you can detect them, are the size of cupcake sprinkles. The largest are no wider than a fingernail. In the photograph in my travel guide, they glint in the mid-Pacific sun. The day I've reserved for visiting Glass Beach is cool and overcast, the glass less obvious to the eye. Or, perhaps, I've arrived after

the sand has been heavily picked over, before the tide has delivered a fresh crop. After an hour—or is it two?—I find barely a handful.

At an early age, 7 or 8, I began collecting rocks. I can hardly tell you the reason, except to say that I come from a lineage that considered them appealing and mysterious. They seemed like the touchstones of our beginnings: primordial gases and liquids, solidified in striated bands, with ribbed or porous skins finished by the elements. As fallout of the Big Bang, they held the first secrets and the first clues. Even plain gray or black stones intrigued me. When dropped into a bowl of water, they brightened into glazed objects of transcendence. An expertly cut diamond dazzles, but the rock on my shelf tells the oldest stories in the universe.

I began by picking agates. *Picking*—this is what we called it, a geologic harvest, like picking cherries or blueberries. “When are you going to the lake to pick rocks?” my grandmother would ask soon after we arrived for our summer vacation in Michigan's Upper Peninsula, where Lake Superior's shores were scattered with more than 150 types of rocks and minerals, attracting collectors from around the country. The lake's beaches, like Glass Beach, were far from ideal for other purposes. The water was icy year-round, the wind could roar on a summer day, the number of summer days was counted in single digits and the gravelly terrain offered little in the way of beach-blanket comfort. In the U.P., a real day at the beach meant a trip to Florida. But I did not care about warm water or bodysurfing or fishing. I had rock fever. I was not alone; signs for rock shops and copper shops and agates, posted along the U.P.'s main highway, were as numerous as the signs for seasonal fruit stands selling raspberries and apples. I would beg whoever was driving to pull off the road, and I sulked dramatically when we didn't, for I knew what we were missing: cases and bins filled with polished agates, geodes split open to reveal spectacular crystallized interiors, dark green stones whose names I did not yet know, petrified wood, copper, quartz nubs, rocks of every ilk.

Although we were certain to pick free specimens at the lake, I rarely left a shop without a purchase. For a few dollars, I walked out with a pouch stuffed with stones or, if I preferred, one or two exceptionally handsome agates. The decision was never easy: too much to

choose from, too little time and money, and—most critical—not enough luggage space. At the end of summer, as our departure date neared, my habit would become problematic. My mother refused to let me bring everything home to California. There would be pleas, tears, inspections to see if my bag was too heavy and then a final, ritualistic weeding of my inventory. Every year, some rocks were left behind in an emptied-out pickle jar labeled with my name.

Many rock shops had no compunction about including bits of polished glass in a box of agates. “You have glass in there!” a relative would say of my store-bought rocks, as if I’d been cheated out of my precious allowance. I did not mind. Glass, it seemed, was rock turned into transparent wonder. At Lake Superior, we found glassy ovals mingled with all varieties of rock, ornamental reminders of the great lake’s powers. I considered the glass highly desirable and pocketed examples of every color, as I do on the beach in Kauai, where my companion—though he helps in earnest, striding toward me with cupped palms—has become restless. “So much to do on the island,” he says. “So much to see.” After all, it’s only glass. It’s only glass and I am 41 and the temperature has risen. “Five more minutes,” I tell him. “Just five more minutes.”

II.

A picture of obsession: An 80-year-old woman in a checkered cotton shift and knee-high nylon stockings sits on a rag rug spread out on the beach, a fierce wind off the lake sweeping back her hair. She leans intently to the side, steadying herself with one hand while the other turns over one rock after another, as if she is inspecting fruits and vegetables in the market. I am stooped near the water, scanning my own swath of shore. The woman, my great-grandmother, is on a mission to help fill my pails and bags. We are determined, methodical, relentless. Our tastes are similar, and she knows what I like—agates, glass, anything striking. We allow no one to break our rhythm of picking. At home, she has huge jars filled with her collections from decades ago: agates and gneiss picked when she was young and her husband was alive. There’s a jar in the pantry, another near the stairs and others that fill the cupboards in the basement. The fever runs in the family, passed on during an outing to the lake or in a gift, grandmother to grandson. One little rock can trigger an epidemic.

My great-grandmother prefers to stay on her rug while I leap from boulder to boulder, stopping to extend my reach into water as deep as my arm is long and bring up stones, until the lake, incapable of warmth, stings my skin. Whether agate or not, every eye-catcher is plunked into my pail. Serious kid, serious picking. But apparently, I have strayed too far out on the boulders. Some of the adults begin hollering to the wind: Be careful, don’t fall, the currents are strong, they’ll pull you out, you’ll freeze in a minute, the Edmund Fitzgerald sank out there, you have enough rocks for now!

“You’ll drown!” my mother yells. “Is that what you want?”

My great-grandmother, the accomplice, shouts back, “Leave him alone!” And then she returns to her picking.

One day, my other grandmother, who also lives in the U.P., summons me to her room. She is my father’s mother; the affliction has hit both sides of the family, leading me to believe in a genetic predisposition to rock addiction. This grandmother asks me to sit on the edge of her bed as she opens a drawer and retrieves a small coin purse. Her room smells of bath powder and tea leaves. Upon our arrival, she had asked, “Where will you go picking rocks?” Sitting down beside me now, she opens the purse and removes a polished stone, creamy white with faint webs of pink and green. It is the most astonishing rock I have ever seen, and she is giving it to me—*giving* it to me! “I want you to have this,” her gentle voice says. “Keep it in a safe place.” She goes on to tell me the stone’s name: Thomsonite. I have never heard of it, but what she has placed into my hand is the equivalent of—what? It has no equivalent. To the young rock hound, the value is unfathomable. I show the stone to everyone—but only once—then wrap it in cotton wads and store it in a white ring box secured with rubber bands. That is how it remains, tucked into a desk drawer in my Manhattan apartment. I take it out once every year or so, carefully unfolding the protective layers. I rest the stone in my palm, look at it under light from a lamp and then in sunlight pouring through a window. I wrap it up again, put it away and sit as I did 35 years ago, quietly mesmerized.

At the end of another summer, my mother is yelling again, “You’re not taking all those rocks! What will you do with them?” My

travel bag is bulging, and the contours of the tightly packed rocks can be seen pressing against the canvas. I can barely lift the bag with one arm.

What does one *do* with so many rocks? What any collector does with his collections: keep them, look at them, show them off, dream about them. Back at home, I would store the rocks in canisters and spread my favorites on a towel draped over my desk. At times, my sister and I engaged in earnest, prolonged trading sessions: a Lake Superior agate for a mottled turquoise node from Reno, where our mother and father had played nickel slots and we, unwavering hounds, had descended every afternoon on the shops selling rocks and coins (the two seemed an inextricable pairing in Nevada). When our bartering concluded, we laid out our acquisitions on a white cloth for maximum effect. We stood and appraised our rocks, rolling them between our fingers. Picked, ogled, held, traded, ogled again and again. How could there ever be too many?

"Leave some here," my mother insists. "Your bag weighs a ton! A ton of *rocks!*"

But, later, here is my mother on a Sunday drive to the California desert, ordering my father to steer our Chevy over the hot sand, past cacti and tumbleweeds, until we reach a desiccated alluvial plain that looks like the bottom of a former ocean. "Everyone out of the car," my mother says. "We need some rocks for the yard." We begin filling the trunk with rocks the size of footballs, mostly shale or sandstone. When my father assumes that we've finished after a dozen have been hefted from the desert floor, my mother says, "No, we need more." *More rocks?* Wondrous, amazing words. We load them until the back of the car sags. The weight has shifted, son to mother.

"What are we going to do with all these?" I ask.

"You'll see," she says.

At home, we back the car into the driveway and unload the boulders. My mother eyes them, one by one, for color and shape and size, and then she chooses a locus for each among the sharp-leafed yucca trees and radiant bougainvillea. Our back yard becomes a garden of oceanic rock. Who could have guessed? My mother has contracted the fever in landscaping proportions. Not even she is immune.

III.

Nearly two billion years ago, the northern Michigan territory I roamed as a kid was as high as the Alps. Or higher: Some geologists believe that the region once soared to the height of the Himalayan Mountains. Lake Superior rocks are the detritus of these eroded peaks. The western U.P. is renowned for its rich mineral deposits—copper, greenstone, hematite, quartz and tourmaline found in rocks of the Precambrian era, a term designating the span of time from the earth's formation to the Paleozoic era, a geologic period that commenced 600 million years ago. In the eastern peninsula, the Pictured Rocks National Lakeshore boasts magnificent Paleozoic sandstone bluffs, some rising 200 feet above the pellucid water. Law forbids picking at Pictured Rocks. Beautiful rocks everywhere, an entire national shoreline named after them, yet pocketing even the smallest one is a criminal act—for me, there could be no crueller torture.

Early in the Precambrian era the earth's surface consisted of liquid rock, boiling sulfurs and erupting volcanoes. Rocks rained down everywhere, pulverized upon impact or melted in lava flows. No wonder we refer to this stage as the Hadean era. Life in the form of blue-green algae would not appear on the scene until the mid-Precambrian era, almost another billion years later. Our planet's infancy was Hell-on-Earth, and we rock hounds live in the heavenly aftermath.

Rocks are the descendants and storytellers of barely imaginable eons. Yet our 21st-century preoccupation with recording every moment and thought—through ubiquitous digital photography, Internet blogs and communities of scrap-bookers—has neglected rocks as the premier documents of terrestrial history. A lump of gray limestone from the Lake Superior shore will likely contain fossils of plants and animals that lived 400 million years ago. Antediluvian glaciers drifting down from Canada carried the speckled granite that is lavishly strewn here. Basalt found on the same shore tells a different traveler's tale: A billion years ago, searing liquefied rock swelled through fractures in the earth, spilling forth to form bedrock or drying and breaking into a multitude of black fragments.

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and basic shelters have been constructed of rocks and often demolished by them. Stonehenge, Machu Picchu, Angkor Wat, the Great Wall, the pyramids at Giza and Chichén Itzá are carved, organized rock. Prehistoric artists ground hematite into red ochre powder and used it for their cave paintings. Through visionary coaxing and toil, Michelangelo's "Pietà" began as rock and became, over two years, an illusion of non-rock, wherein lovingly evoked hands and faces are seen first as human and then as stone. In choosing costly granite countertops, we domesticate the earth's wild, turbulent past. A marble slab, after some low-tech polishing, is brought inside to adorn our bathrooms and christened an *objet d'art*—ancient rock transmogrified.

Or we deem it therapeutic: Flat warm stones calm our overworked, overwhelmed souls. In Napa County and Soho spas, oven-baked rocks are placed on our aching bodies, the primal heat melting symptoms of modern stress. Lying on my stomach, I lift and turn my head to glimpse the stones arranged on my lower lumbar. What color are they? What texture? And, more important, could I take just one as a souvenir?

IV

One summer, my sister and I were drawn to a vast pit in the backyard of people we came to visit in Michigan. I don't recall why or how the cavity was there; perhaps it was an unfinished dream—a swimming pool or man-made duck pond. The excavation had exposed tons of rocks littered along the crater's lip, forming a peaked embankment that separated one child's kingdom from another's. I seized the inner kingdom while my sister took her position on the other side. A battle ensued, and rocks began to fly. As I hurled stones into the air, over the embankment, they seemed to volley back instantly, propelled by my sister's mighty arm. The grenades, as we imagined them, traveled high and far, and finally one of them slammed my forehead at the hairline.

I climbed out of the hole and ran toward the house, my blood dripping everywhere but most noticeably on a cement walkway. Later, in the doctor's office, the gash in my head was stitched, and I was sent home with aspirin. Although the injury proved minor, I became aware of a more painful assault: A rock, as weapon, had been

turned against me. For days, I was superstitious. Perhaps I was hoarding too many rocks after all.

According to one legend, drops of Christ's blood fell onto green stones at the foot of the cross, resulting in bloodstone or, as it also came to be known, martyr's stone. Believing in bloodstone's sacred import, medieval Christians used it to carve sculptures of the crucifixion and martyrdom. Strictly speaking, bloodstone is a mineral, a natural substance with an inorganic chemical composition and an internal crystalline structure. Bloodstone proper is a form of green chalcedony dotted with lustrous red jasper, which is a type of quartz—also a mineral—with highly oxidized iron deposits providing the color. A woman who owns the Ozark Rock Exchange informed me that soldiers once took bloodstone into battle for protection and courage, and because it was believed to stop bleeding and promote healing. At the very least, it could be flung at one's opponent. Bloodstone, I am told, helped destroy enemy troops in Babylonia.

As with a host of other rocks and minerals, bloodstone's properties span a mystical and medicinal gamut. It was thought to stop hemorrhages upon contact, to relieve stomachaches, to improve circulation, to strengthen the bladder and kidney, and to heighten intelligence. Finely powdered bloodstone is still consumed as an aphrodisiac in India. "Perhaps that explains why today it is difficult to find fine specimens on the market," says a blurb in a gem guide from the International Colored Gemstone Association.

Bloodstone for courage and circulation; moonstone for menopause; turquoise for stress; copper for arthritis; loadstone for bronchitis; malachite for asthma; carnelian for allergies; lapis lazuli for cancer; obsidian for assisting the process of dying, of transition, of letting go; and amethyst for grief—the hard, lifeless matter soothes us.

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A regional guidebook for Michigan declares, "Rocks are, without doubt, the oldest antiques on earth." For all these years, I have been antiquing. On my bookshelf, a wedge of marble picked from Rome looks very much like a chip from a colossal ruin. Could it be? Nearby, an Oregon geode sliced in half divulges a blue I have never seen elsewhere—a blue of the outer-reaches. A platter of splendid

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agates sits on the kitchen counter and another tray is filled with little pieces of everywhere: pebbles from the Yucatán Peninsula, where a comet's collision with Earth precipitated the Ice Age; white, chalky samples from Dover; and my multicolored yield from Glass Beach.

And on the closet floor of my childhood bedroom—stashed for safekeeping—lie two weighty fragments of familial history: oblong chunks of copper, the size of large russet potatoes, with greenish-black oxidized surfaces, pleasingly cool to the skin. I take them out of the closet at least once during each visit with my mother and father in California.

I first saw the copper on a garage shelf in the house belonging to the great-grandmother who aided and defended me at Lake Superior. The northwestern U.P. is called Copper Country, because it once contained the world's largest mass of pure copper. Mining began there in the mid-1800s. By the late 1960s, more than nine billion tons of copper had been removed, including a monolith that measured 46 feet by 18 feet and weighed 420 tons. The two examples before me could, I thought, be turned into thousands of pennies. I discovered them when I wandered, out of boredom, into the garage to look at my grandmother's old things—the antiques she did not regard as valuable. At first, I had assumed the hunks of copper were plain rock, but then I noticed a subdued metallic sheen beneath the dark patina. In my hands, they were twice as heavy as other rocks. At that moment, I wanted them more than anything else in the world.

I thought about taking them without asking—stealing from my own grandmother, an act far more offensive than disobeying the edict against picking at Picture Rocks National Lakeshore. As I examined the copper, desire and guilt collided in manic passion. I could not move and I could not decide and I began to sweat. The logistics of pilfering the copper lumps had not occurred to me: How would I bring them into the house and up the stairs to the bedroom without being noticed? How would I explain the extraordinary load—would I be able to carry my stash inconspicuously? And what about the question that would be asked once I was back in California: Where did you get those? I had never stolen anything, had never contemplated even a one-time-only daredevil stunt of juvenile shoplifting. Now a molten temptation compelled me. The copper pieces in my

hands felt satisfying and complete. If I took these, perhaps I would never need anything else.

The heat of the garage, along with my moral deliberation, had become too much. I had to get out for air. I left the copper on the shelf and marched into the house. In the kitchen, my great-grandmother stood at the stove, cooking our next meal. I was 11 or 12 and hungry for only one thing.

“Can I have those copper rocks out in the garage?”

My grandmother stopped stirring a pot and looked at me. Many seconds passed, a segment of geologic time: forever.

“Yes,” she finally said, “you can have those. Your great-grandpa dug those up when he was building this house.” My great-grandfather, who had been dead for more than 20 years, had placed the copper pieces on the garage shelf, where they remained untouched until I came along and held them in my sweaty, trembling hands.

VI.

My prized Thomsonite belongs to the zeolite group of minerals and has a chemical composition designated as $\text{NaCa}_2\text{Al}_5\text{Si}_5\text{O}_{20} \cdot 6\text{H}_2\text{O}$ —hydrated sodium calcium aluminum silicate, a name I know only through a lucky strike on the Internet. I cannot type the hieroglyphic shorthand without feeling agitated by my shortcomings. As a rock hound simpleton, I cannot tell you the chemistry's significance or why water does not spill from hydrated stone. The deeper science eludes me.

In college, I enrolled in a geology course, a non-science-major's easy pass that was archaically called “Man and His Environment.” A week after the midterm exam, the professor walked into the cavernous lecture hall and called out my name. Startled, I remained silent. “Where are you?” he asked. Finally, I raised my hand. “Highest grade on the test,” he said. I had no idea how I did it. All the terminology and classifications had felt burdensome; despite my passion for rocks, I had studied begrudgingly. Afterward, the professor attempted to recruit me into his department. As enticement, he offered to waive a required chemistry course. There was talk of money, research positions, field explorations in faraway places and hints of guaranteed admission to the graduate program. The English department had never been so seductive.

But I never believed that my rock hunting should become a career. My resistance to science aside, geology struck me as an untenable profession, one that was both too incomprehensible and too trivial: on the one hand, the daunting sweep of geologic time and the history of the earth—of the *universe!*—and, on the other, the pretty, here-and-now materiality of my rock collection. Rocks were everywhere, yet who gave them much thought? In earthquake country, a moderate tremor put the U.S. Geological Survey guys (they always seemed to be men) on the evening news, but otherwise, the field remained out of sight and out of mind. And for my own tastes, geology seemed too much of a macho man's job: onerous treks to lunaresque desert lands, hiking under the pounding sun, chipping away at mountains, drilling into faults, all that khaki. I had never gone camping. I recoiled from the idea of defecating under the stars. I was happy enough with my hobby. I was happy to roam a lakeshore for a pocketful of stones.

As an *amateur*—as “one who loves what he does”—I travel with my rock-hound eyes wide open and, whether on a day-trip to Fire Island or on a backbreaking excursion through Vietnam, mostly looking down at the ground beneath me. This is my avocation. Looking down, poking my foot into rock piles, assessing the goods. Or occasionally looking up to find a serene Buddhist figure chiseled out of mountainous rock rising from Ha Long Bay; Anasazi drawings etched into the red cliffs in the Valley of Fire; or a Mayan shrine of stones stacked in a sea cave where I crouch in cool water, shivering and stunned. Looking, looking, looking, as if I have lost something—my keys or my mind. I am not easily lured from the beaches of Lake Superior and Lake Michigan, or from the beds, dusted with fool's gold, of the American and Sacramento rivers, where our parents took us with prospecting pans. Looking down, knees bent, hands in constant motion. What will I find next—the mother of all rocks, the emerald-studded crag, the genuine nugget overlooked by sloppy claim jumpers? Anything gorgeous will suffice.

On an autumn morning in Manhattan, I accompanied my mother and father to the Guggenheim Museum to see the sculptures of Constantin Brancusi, the first modernist sculptor to break from the common practice of modeling his work initially in clay. Instead,

he carved his material directly. But to simply say that he carved seems injudicious, for he had performed a kind of Glass Beach miracle. On the Guggenheim's coiled ramp to the heavens, I stood still at a marble piece from 1920, an impeccably smooth, white ovoid, two or three times larger than an ostrich egg. Displayed on a steel and limestone base, it appeared to have been polished, over and over, by endless pulses of seawater and granular friction, tossed and incubated for ages. Our ethereal beginnings were condensed and frozen into this marble rock, and it seemed at once fragile and durable, simple and complex, fleeting and eternal, a rock and not a rock, lifeless and an encapsulation of all life. Who could believe that a human being had ever touched it? Yet a man's hand had taken stone and released these contradictions.

This rapturous beauty was called “The Beginning of the World,” and I desperately wanted to take it home. Like all zealous collectors, a rock hound is never satisfied. I could hardly pull myself away to see the rest of the exhibit. I wanted to rub my hands over the surface of the world's beginnings, but, of course, contact was forbidden. I got as close as I could without setting off alarms or arousing the suspicion of museum guards. With my arms outstretched, I spread my fingers and tried to feel—what? I wasn't sure. Perhaps a geologic aura, or Brancusi's spirit, or reverberations of first life. For a moment, with my eyes closed, I imagined myself leaning over a moss-covered outcrop, peering into a pool of clear water containing one sublime stone.

Several months later, I strolled across the city to the Whitney Museum to see an exhibition of work by Isamu Noguchi, who once served as Brancusi's studio assistant. Noguchi experimented with a range of materials—metal, wood, paper—but his most powerful sculptures are boulders whose interiors he exposed by a few carefully chosen cuts. His was a minimalist approach with maximum effect. In “The Inner Stone,” a basalt piece that is dated 1973 but whose evolution actually began before humans existed, Noguchi's three touches of the stone's coarse brown surface disclose a sleek gray interior. The bracing contrast suggests an urgent and humane message. We must know ourselves by looking inward and by studying nature; we must know our time. Stone and flesh are traced to the same combusive birth.

And one day, many years ago, I walked alone to the banks of a stream in Sedona, Ariz., ostensibly to photograph some hills that

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resembled a cathedral against the broad sky. I snapped away in the changing light—it was near dusk, with sky and mountains merging into a luminous violet wash—and when I was done, I put my camera away and looked down. There at my feet was a small, black stone, half the size of my thumb. It stood out from all the rest because, strangely, it was highly polished: It had been collected by someone, from somewhere else, placed into a tumbler, ground and shined by weeks of processing. How did it get there? Who had dropped it? And was it by accident or on purpose? I held the rock in my hand and looked upstream and down, thinking that I might see, in the distance, a child looking, the child who had once owned it. There was no one. I was 38, and I was still coming down to the convergence of water and rock, to the elucidating shore. I almost left the rock where I'd found it. Sedona, they say, is replete with powerful energy vortexes; I was not about to disrupt this one. For a moment, I replaced the pebble on the ground but picked it up again. I believed that it was mine, that it had always been mine. Longing and memory hounded me. I slipped the rock into my pocket and glanced, one more time, at the cathedral as it sank into darkness.

At Glass Beach, a woman sitting alone on the sand has been watching me. She knows. She has an extra plastic bag, and she hands it to me without speaking. Her eyes, however, seem to say: This is not the most bountiful day, the assortment is running thin, the beach has been picked over. And by whom? By people like us, of course. The non-surfers, the stooped, the children, the feverish. In five more minutes, the tide could turn, imbuing the mundane.

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