

## *Stones*

In the rubble of Pablo Picasso's *Guernica*, a dying man stares up at the sky. I am on my knees next to him, holding his head in my hands. I wipe the tears from his eyes and tell him that I love him. I smooth his hair and tell him everyone llything will be all right. I tell him he k notkkk l, but the truth is that I can no longer see where his body begins and ends. The man that I love—with a pierced and splintered body—reaches for something that I cannot see. I want to be able to see what he sees. I take his hand, but then the light changes between us. The man turns to stone and his eyes close. Someday I will carry this stone—this memory—with a clenched fist. I will take this stone that I have carried from the bombed and burning city of my childhood when Picasso's painting represented so much fighting, and—with either hope or with anger—throw it into a great body of water. What will happen to this stone? Will it ever be discovered by someone or will it stay on the bottom of a lake or ocean? Perhaps it will pile up with other stones on a desolate beach, year after year—as anger often does when we cannot forgive—until a wall is built up and there is no way to get beyond it to the other side. When survivors of the Gernika bombing found stones like these among the rubble of their lives—a hollow torso, a missing limb, a fractured hand—did they wish for peace or did they wish for revenge?

When my father died, I was responsible for purchasing his gravestone. There were more choices involved with this transaction than I anticipated. While I flipped through catalogs at Rockdale Monument & Stone Company in rural Wisconsin, Johnathan, my sales associate directed me to first choose the type of stone I wanted to mark my father's final resting place.

Would I prefer granite, sandstone, marble, slate, or fieldstone? Did I want a stone with a solid color or one with multi-colored flecks? I also needed to consider the shape of the memorial. Did I want for my father a flat marker or an upright headstone? Perhaps he should have a ledger stone that would completely cover and lay flat against his grave, or even an ostentatious obelisk, one of those tall, four-sided column gravestones rising to a point at the tip. Would I need a beveled edge on the granite? Perhaps I wanted a polished stone surface or a rugged, rock-like finish. These normally easy choices completely overwhelmed me when I had to make a more important decision. Would I continue to be angry at my father or would I finally choose peace?

For the time being, however, at Rockdale Monument & Stone Company, I had to make a decision about something even more daunting than the particular size or material of my father's memorial. I had to choose how his name would appear on his gravestone. Even though my mother wanted a double memorial so that in the future she could be buried next to my father, she insisted—with great bitterness—that my father's last name *Prafke*, taken as her own in marriage, would not appear in bold capital letters across the top of the headstone. I had a difficult time convincing Johnathan of this deviation from tradition. The entire standard template needed to be redesigned, allowing for *David Marc Profke* to be engraved on one side of the stone and *Carol Jean Profke* to be engraved on the other side. Jonathan argued that the inscription would be needlessly redundant and not nearly as aesthetically pleasing to the eye. The stone might also not be wide enough to accommodate this unusual request. In the end, I finally convinced Jonathan to do what my mother had requested.

Years later, I realized that in denying the emphasis of my father's name *Prafke* on their gravestone—a name my mother had always hated because it represented so many things she could never forgive—in a small and subtle way, my mother would have the revenge that she so

desired. In death, she would finally escape my father's domination. If the truth of the matter, then, was that I also did not want to forgive my father, what choices were left to me? What choices do we have in life if we cannot forgive?

On April 26, 1937, during the Spanish Civil War, the Basque city of Gernika was bombed by German and Italian aircraft as a show of support for a military revolt led by Francisco Franco against the Republican government. During the three-hour attack, the small town of Gernika was leveled to the ground by incendiary bombs. Internationally condemned as one of the first aerial attacks against innocent civilians, the event inspired Pablo Picasso to paint his masterpiece *Guernica*.

Many Basques were never given the dignity of a gravestone after the bombing of Gernika. Their gravestones were the stone and wooden walls of buildings in which they lived and loved, the red tile roofs that collapsed over their heads as they attempted to escape the low-flying German fighter planes sanctioned by Francisco Franco. Kaxtor Amunarriz, a survivor of the Gernika bombing who was interviewed by American sheep herder William L. Smallwood a few years before the death of Franco in 1975, recalls his attempt to dig through the stone rubble.

*From the plaza I went to a house that had collapsed and had buried the people who had taken refuge in the cellar. Fortunately, it had not yet started to burn. Some of the people outside knew where the entrance was located and we started working in that vicinity, lifting away the debris with our hands. I lifted a stone and I saw something familiar. Then I realized that it was part of a face. Quickly I cleaned off some of the debris. It was the*

*head of a man. I shouted for help. We began pulling the material off his body. I cleaned the dirt from his face. He was still breathing.*

Even when we manage to miraculously avoid death, rise from the rubble of our lives, and then also—unbelievably—embrace forgiveness, are we ever really able to overcome our fear? When my father died, my mother was very particular about my father’s gravestone. She did not want a vertical monument visible from a distance. Instead, my mother insisted on a gravestone for my father—and herself—that was flat against the ground, fearing that if she had an upright gravestone, vandals would knock it down. My mother’s reasoning for a flat gravestone was yet another manifestation of her debilitating anxiety. This anxiety eventually evolved into an irrational paranoia and obsessive compulsion that would not allow her to leave her house for months at a time, trapped under the rubble of her life. Perhaps these gravestone vandals my mother feared were like those glassy-eyed German Condor Legion pilots—themselves half-dead—in heavy, low-flying planes that dropped gray stone bombs on a peaceful city nestled between mountains. Without a doubt, though, these vandals my mother feared—the ones that would take a sledgehammer to her gravestone—were manifestations of my father who had an uncontrollable temper.

Stones were not always used to mark the final resting place of loved ones. Stones were once piled over graves in order to prevent the dead from haunting the living. My mother, who feared nameless vandals would destroy her gravestone, was haunted by ghosts. They were the dark and shapeless spirits of her twenty-two-year old brother who drowned in a boating accident and her sister who killed herself by drowning, much like how the writer Virginia Woolf—whose home had been bombed twice during World War II—filled her pockets with stones in 1941, and

walked into the River Ouse behind her house in England, never to return. My mother, the only survivor of three children, never really forgave herself for living.

As a child, I spent many days picking up stones in my yard. In the spring, when the ground was still soft from the melted snow, my father would hand me a bucket and tell me to pick up the small gray pebbles that—over the course of a long Wisconsin winter—his snowblower had thrown onto our yard when he was plowing our gravel driveway. Every year I dreaded this task. No sooner did I pick up one stone and throw it into my bucket, than I noticed another one in the grass. No matter how many stones I picked up and dropped in my bucket, there were always more in the grass. I continued to work, even when my knees were stained with mud, even when my fingers were numb from the cold. Every few hours I would drag a bucket full of stones to my father who would eye me with judgement—either I was too slow or too lazy—and silently yank the bucket from me. Staring off at some unachievable ideal on the horizon, he would heave the bucket over his shoulder and scatter the gravel—what I had so carefully collected—onto our long driveway. Then, just as silently, he would thrust the bucket back into my hands. I would always return to the grass—never exactly sure where to continue—and pick up more stones.

The seasons changed. The years passed in silence. I grew older and my father remained angry. I continued to pick up stones and he continued to throw them back to the ground. In this endless cycle of always returning to my father for approval, I was never good enough, despite all the stones I picked up, despite my frozen fingers and stained knees. He was always so angry. Years later, after I had grown up and left home, there was no one to pick up the stones in my father's yard, but for some reason this no longer seemed to matter to him. When I began visiting my parents less and less frequently, my father would often stand in his driveway with tears in his

eyes as I was about to leave. His hair had receded and his teeth yellowed. He walked more carefully and his shoulders slumped ever so slightly. Each time my father stood in his driveway to say good-bye to me, he mostly likely stood on stones that I had worked so hard to pick up for him as a child, stones that were now so worn and pressed deep into the ground that they would never be removed by either one of us. I often wonder what pain was so deeply embedded in him that it brought tears to his eyes.

Many years later, when my father was in recovery after an operation on his kidneys, the surgeon walked up to me in the waiting room and with purposeful drama—as if irritated at his inconvenience—slammed down a clear plastic container on the table in front of me. It was filled to the top with small stones that the doctor had painstakingly removed from my father’s kidneys. These kidney stones that my father had collected in his body throughout the course of his life had never eroded like anger usually does with time, temperance, and humility. Instead the stones had multiplied and grown inside him—the shapes irregular and sharp—grinding and rolling grievances until they caused my father such excruciating pain that he needed emergency care. The stones grew until they were simply too heavy for him to carry. The surgeon told me that he had never seen so many stones in one human body.

I don’t know why my father was angry. I do know that his anger was like those kidney stones—both irregular and sharp—grinding and rolling inside him until it caused him such pain that he lashed out at everyone around him. Ruth Prafke—my father’s mother whom he had estranged for most of my life—often left messages on our answering machine, saying that she was praying for our family. When I was a child, I remember our neighbors hated my father so much that when they were replacing the siding on their house, they spray painted in bright red letters the word *asshole* and an arrow that pointed to our property. Years later, when I was a

teenager, my father's electrical union employer demoted him and reduced his pay in response to his uncontrollable temper at work. Even a member of my father's military unit once quietly pulled my mother aside at a government function, and—perhaps concerned with my mother's safety—admitted that he could not understand how she tolerated my father's behavior. Later in life, when my father was no longer able to care for himself and the long-term care facility where he resided was about to close due to lack of government funding, I was unable to find another nursing home willing to take him because he struck nurses across the face. Not until he was near death—unconscious and posing no risk of assault—was anyone willing to give him a bed for the final few weeks of his life.

This was, however, all still in the future. For now, in the hospital waiting room, I stared at my father's kidney stones—the rubble of his life in a small plastic vial—and grasped for some sort of context with which I could make sense of the world. Little did I know that the physiological trauma of this surgery would be the beginning of the end of my father's memory—if memory can be considered the container of one's experience—when, after recovery, he was no longer able to remember what he had said minutes earlier, such as details of the warm spring weather and how all the snow in the yard had nearly melted. In time, my father was no longer able to complete a series of steps, such as starting his snowblower by setting the choke, increasing the throttle, turning on the flow of fuel, and igniting the engine. Eventually, he would no longer remember that I was his daughter who had once tried so hard to please him with a pail of stones. I wonder what is worse in life, not being able to remember, or—in my situation—not being able to forget.

Perhaps this endless cycle of carrying and throwing stones—of moving through life filled with either hope or despair, anger or forgiveness—is larger than my understanding. The last great

Wisconsin ice age retreated from my childhood home a little over 10,000 years ago, leaving behind enormous ridges of unsorted gravel, sand, and boulders that were carried by glaciers, those great continental sheets of ice. Some of these stone deposits are only ten feet high, while others rise 250 to 300 feet over the land. These ridges are called the Kettle Moraine in southeastern Wisconsin. Created over thousands of years by advancing and receding glaciers, these beautiful rolling hills shaped my vision of the world. As a child, I learned from the landscape around me that it is possible for time to be both slow and fast, that small choices can lead to dramatic changes over the course of a life.

And yet all the stone rubble of Gernika was created in a mere three hours of relentless bombing one afternoon in 1937—time both slow and fast for those Basques who experienced a suddenly changed landscape—an annihilation—both external and internal for those who understand the effects of war. Survivors spent months painstakingly removing stone rubble to find the dead—their lovers, their children, their mothers and their fathers. Survivors then spent the remainder of their lives painstakingly removing the stone rubble from their memory. Perhaps there were even angry and fearful survivors of the Gernika bombing who spent the remainder of their lives using these same stones to build up walls around themselves. Regardless of our circumstances—no one who lives can escape tragedy—we are all, in some way, burdened with the stones we carry. Do we then choose to throw our stones in anger—casting judgement on others—or do we let go of our stones with hope and set to work at easing the burden of those who cannot let go of the heavy weight they carry? These are questions that I must continually answer for myself as I bear the memory of my father.

Where is this place of peace and forgiveness, then, that we reach for in our dreams? Is it a real country of stone borders—of limitations and divisions—or is it a home that transcends both time and space, a forgotten county that already exists in all of us? Joseba Sarrionandia, the Basque poet who was imprisoned and tortured by the Spanish state for his role in ETA, an armed Basque nationalist organization that once fought for independence from Spain, wrote the following poem “Stone and Country” in homage to the poet Gabriel Aresti. Sarrionandia uses the metaphor of stone to illustrate the Basque desire for a free and independent country that still remains—to this day—a dream. Perhaps, though, one might also read the poem at a different level, one of transcendence that moves beyond our understanding of physical and cultural limitations. Perhaps as humans we all search for a similar country that is beyond our reach, an internal landscape of peace.

*There is a corner in the world (we didn't choose it  
before we were born)  
that we regard as our country. And the whole world is ours  
if our country is ours.  
But we put our wet stones in  
pockets with holes.*

*Although we made the effort, what we did was not always  
what we should have done,  
the dead and the distances gradually increased,  
and the world,  
that is six thousand time bigger than our country,  
is riven by boundary stones.*

*At the frontier, if the customs officer Henry Rousseau asks  
where we're from and where we're going  
we show him our wet stones, because  
we do have stones:  
“Can you see this stone, this pebble?  
this was our home...”*

*Nowhere are we surveyors, cartographers  
of a nonexistent country.  
Our todays have filled up with yesterdays,  
we walk in search of our own feet.  
Do you remember that ancient native land we lost?*

*We have stones but we have no country.  
We have stones  
in our pockets with holes, but nowhere will be build  
a house that lasts forever.  
Are stones more beautiful  
set in a wall?*

Whether these stones in our lives—the ones we put in our pockets with holes—are the stones collected by a little girl wanting to please her father, the stones settling in the kidneys of an aging man, a flat gravestone protected from vandals, or the stone rubble of a small Basque town after a relentless air raid bombing, these are the stones that shape our lives for better or worse. What we do with these stones is up to us. Do we use these stones to build walls and mark the borders of countries or do we lovingly mark the graves of our angry fathers and wish for peace? Do we make a wish by tossing these stones into the ocean or do we continue to carry—with anger and resentment—the stone rubble of our tragedies?

Picasso's *Guernica* represents the tragedies of war in 1937—perhaps even the tragedies of life—but also the redemption of peace. In the rubble of Picasso's fragmented Cubism, a soldier has fallen. The dying man stares up at the stars with a face of stone. I am on my knees holding his head in my hands and smoothing the hair from his face. I remove the broken sword from his hand and replace it with a white flower. I tell him to stop fighting. Now it is the year 2018. My father has fallen and broken his hip on uneven landscaping stones in his yard, an accident that will lead to his death. I wipe the tears from my father's eyes and tell him that I love

him. I remove the stone from his hand and replace it with a white flower. I tell him to stop fighting.

I tell my father that everything will be all right as he lay dying in a bed that no one wants to give him. I tell him everything will be all right as they lower his casket into a waiting grave. Everywhere I look across the silent cemetery, there are gravestones, some small and some large, some tilted with age and some decorated with wreaths. If I could, I would clear the field of these stones, Father. In the spring I would carry these stones away with my frozen fingers. I would drag them away on my soiled knees. I would do this, Father, even though I know I will find no survivors. When the light changes and a cloud passes over the field, I turn back to my father's open grave. Along the edge, there are a few small stones covered in mud, nestled within clumps of grass. I pry them from the dirt and throw them on my father's coffin in the ground.

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