



On Beauty and Death

My point of departure is a remarkable rock formation bearing a drawing — later I thought: perhaps it was a petrified fairy. But that was only my first attempt to name something that, in essence, cannot be named.

It was low tide, and I wondered whether I should lower myself further into the sea cave. The water was slowly rising. I was alone. I was wearing Wellington boots, not sturdy waterproof footwear; if the sea began to hurry, I would have to hurry too.

It was my third time on this shore. The sea had shifted the loose stones on the floor, and now I could see the pattern clearly, illuminated by my headtorch. I was in a state of pure wonder.

Hundreds of stones lie in my house and studio. A soft grey stone from Calabria, crossed by white lines, which could resemble a giraffe — I painted her with processed pigments on a jute canvas. More than once, I returned home with a bag full of river stones. Stones containing crystals I place in the sun, in turn, depending on their composition.

On Achill, my research *The Silent Skin* took a new direction. The stone led me not only deeper into the Earth, but also opened onto the space from which its matter originated. What reveals itself in rock as pressure, folding and crystallisation began, for me, to form part of a far greater movement of rhythm, matter and time.

The sound of the waves is drawing ever closer. My desire to descend and touch her is strong. I have already slipped twice. Imagine sliding back down again as I try to climb out of this sea-cellar, while the tide continues to rise.

At first sight, the title of this essay may seem unrelated to any of this. And yet it is held within this stone.

These layers were once sand and mud on an ocean floor. As continents collided, ancient oceans closed and immense quantities of sediment were carried deep into the Earth's crust. Under pressure and heat, the rock did not melt, but was reordered. Sand became quartzite, mud became schist. Layers were folded, tilted, compressed and crystallised.

What lies before me, then, is not static matter. It is a state within a long movement.

What disappeared was rearranged.
Something had to end in order to take on another form.

Rock as stardust descended to Earth; millions of years of transformation. Memory cleft open, remembrance held within matter.

In the darkness of the cave, I suddenly think of lilac and purple — of the colours of the papal robes in Francis Bacon's paintings. Tormented, animated and deeply lived, his canvases are, and so extraordinarily beautiful. *Study of a Bull*(1991), his final painting, shows a bull half dissolving into — or perhaps emerging from — a pitch-black void. Beneath the bull, Bacon worked dust and dirt from his studio into the painting.

Dust and body. Appearing and disappearing. Form emerging from darkness and returning to it.

Perhaps beauty is to be found precisely there: not in opposition to death, but at the moment when one form passes into another.

The cave, too, changes when I look at her differently. In black and white, what remains above all are the folds, fractures and skin of the rock. In colour, lilac, purple, green, ochre and blue-grey emerge — colours held within the stone for millions of years and visible only under a certain light.

At the back of my garden, the clematis is flowering now. Her name comes from the Greek word for a climbing plant: she reaches out, searches for something to hold on to, and climbs upwards from the dark earth. Her unfolded flowers are lilac.

The same colour that revealed itself to me in the sea cave unfolds here in daylight —

a flowering star.

Everything moves through the silent skin of time.

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