

Cathedral Rock

Thinking Sand

Cathedral Rock, Achill Island
19 June 2024, 1.05 pm

A few minutes after photographing *The Stone's Song*, I turn towards another rock face.

I have left my tripod at home that day. The north-westerly wind pushes against my body. I stand with my feet wide apart before the rock, trying to follow the movement of my eyes with my camera.

The rock face is barely ten metres from the dark inner chamber I have just photographed, yet it speaks another language. Lighter. Rawer. Almost the colour of sand.

A deep vertical fissure runs through its centre. On either side, hundreds of thin layers lie one upon another, folded, displaced, compressed. As though someone had slammed a stone book shut and then kept it under pressure for millions of years.

The Folded Skin 1.

I walk on, and a little further along another giant rises before me. I move closer, into the folds. Here, the stone is no longer the colour of sand. Rust. Purple. Green. Blue-grey.

The Folded Skin 2.

On 7 August 2026, I read a remark by Demis Hassabis in NRC. He is talking about computer chips and artificial intelligence:

'When you think about it, we've essentially found a way to make sand think. That's extraordinary.'

I linger over that sentence.

Making sand think.

I look again at the photograph from Achill.

What capacity for thought might this stone hold?

Not because I believe the rock thinks as we do. But because I can no longer let go of the question of where thought actually begins. In the brain? In carbon? In electrical impulses? Or does its history begin much earlier, in matter that continually reorganises itself under the influence of energy?

The pale bands in the rock face were once sediment. Sand, mud, minerals. Pressure and heat changed the way they held together. Iron oxidised. Mica caught the light. What had once been loose material became rock.

Time solidified.

And further back still lie the stars.

The silicon, oxygen, carbon and iron that make up stone, bodies and, eventually, computer chips carry a history older than the Earth. Some of these elements formed in earlier generations of stars and became building material again after their death.

In sand, in rock and in our own bodies lies matter from dead stars. Star ash, reordered.

From stardust to stone.
From stone to body.
From mineral to chip.

And somewhere in that movement, something emerges that can ask itself questions.

But a chip that calculates does not yet ask itself questions. Perhaps I need to distinguish between processing information and being aware that you are doing so.

In the same article, I read that when Hassabis walks through Cambridge, he can feel the spirit of his great predecessors. 'As though they were speaking to you through the paving stones.' He mentions Spinoza's God: *Deus sive Natura*, God, or Nature. For him, conducting research and building AI feels like reading the language of the universe.

For Spinoza, there is no boundary between thought and matter. Everything is animate, only in differing degrees.

Two days after reading the sentence about thinking sand, I swim in the Oosterschelde.

Summer and winter, I enter the water here. Three years ago, I scattered Renée's ashes here, near the site of her studio by the sea.

In August, the jellyfish arrive. First the small white ones, then the large blue and milky bodies. Sometimes they glide past my arms. Sometimes I touch one with my foot, or my hand meets a soft body as I swim. They eat and excrete through the same opening. An extraordinary simplicity.

They have no brains, only a net of nerves. Yet they respond, seek food, flee. Do they think?

I move with every wave. When the current and wind drive the water higher, it becomes harder.

Beneath me lies sand. Around me, salt, plankton, mussels, jellyfish and the remains of countless lives. The dead, too, have become part of this water.

The minerals remain. They become building material again. How fertile are the ashes of our dead?

The mussels taste good this year.

Sometimes there is sand in them.

The thinking sand grates between my teeth.

The sound reaches my molars.

Where does the capacity for thought begin?

Essay August 2026
© Ingrid van de Linde | Thinking Sand