

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Faculty Publications -- Department of English

English, Department of

January 2001

Pockets of Stones

Thomas Lynch

University of Nebraska - Lincoln, tlynch2@unl.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/englishfacpubs>



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Lynch, Thomas, "Pockets of Stones" (2001). *Faculty Publications -- Department of English*. 34.

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/englishfacpubs/34>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the English, Department of at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications -- Department of English by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

Published in *Southwestern American Literature* 27.1 (2001): 51–53. Copyright © 2001 by the Center for the Study of the Southwest, Texas State University–San Marcos.

CSSW home: <http://swrhc.txstate.edu/cssw/>

SAL home: <http://swrhc.txstate.edu/cssw/publications/sal.php>

Used by permission.

Pockets of Stones

Tom Lynch

We stand beneath a hard blue bowl, carved and polished turquoise to a flawless sheen. Well no, it's just the sky, because when I turn around, there's the bright autumn sun.

This warm October day the boys and I take the trail towards Dripping Springs, then swing north on the Crawford trail, past the ruins of the Modoc mine and mill. Beyond the mill site, the trail turns east, straight at the sheer walled mountains, passes into a boulder-choked defile and then stops abruptly at a smooth and curved cliff face—damp with a delicate trickle of water. It's a box cañon, one easy way in, and only the same way back out, the sort of place the Apaches loved to entice the guileless cavalry to enter.

The rocks and shrubs on the side of the falls are covered in the vines of the cañon grape. I tell the boys, "Look, a grape vine" and they clamor in unison, "Let's eat some." But it must be too late in the season for I can't find any; the hungry birds have taken them all and the boys turn disappointed to other adventures.

In the spring, if there's been much winter snow, or, more usually, in the late summer after thunderstorms, a sizeable pour of water cascades off the lip of the waterfall and a small pool grows at the bottom. I'm told by those who've been here years back that once a deep, luscious pool lurked here year-round. Today, there's just mud. I squat, inspect the stones, and spot what at first I take for small deer tracks. But now, after checking a field guide, I'm quite sure they're from javelina, the wild pig that lurks in the bajada here, that leaves its traces about, but that nobody I know ever actually sees, a sort of spectral peccary presence. This speck of mud that holds glimmering depressions is the only water for many miles. At night this cañon bottom must be busy with animals, ears alert, sipping, pausing to listen hard at the darkness, thirst overwhelming fear, sipping again. I don't doubt that in deep night a shadowed cougar crouches behind those boulders, starlight glinting from a moist whisker. Maybe he's eyeing us even now.

The boys jabber non-stop. I discourage them from throwing stones at the cliffs above, for ricochets can catch us here, but tolerate it when they smack stones off the boulders nearby. Cody, almost 7, has good aim with his rocks. But his brother, Riley, who's only 3, and who likes to throw sidearm, can unleash his stone to nearly any point of the compass.

The slope of the cañon wall is steep, but, as I peer up, arching my neck back, I realize it's not quite sheer. Numerous ledges terrace the cliff, each holding a desert garden—yellow flowered chamisa, prickly pear paddles,

and the pale blue, spike-tipped spirals of agave. If you know how, you can make mescal and tequila from these.

As the terrain at the cliff top curves back from sheer, numerous tough, thin, serrate, and serried balls of sotol leaves clump among the equally round boulders. A few retain their tall stalks, paniced with dry flowers; some stand bolt upright, some cast askew as the wind lays them down.

I lift the boys onto a large, 6-foot high, flat-topped boulder—grey and pale tan granite. We lunch. As the boys munch their peanut butter and honey sandwiches, I cherish the momentary quiet.

seep spring trickle—
bees hum among
the last flowers

Done eating, I dangle the boys by their arms off the edge of our lunch rock, drop them the few feet to crunch in the gravel. They dart off to clamber up and down the boulders in the arroyo bottom. My mantra, “be careful, be careful, watch for snakes, scorpions, and spiders, snakes, scorpions, spiders, snakes, scorpions . . .” drones past them. I give up and lounge back on the stone.

Two sorts of trees grow abundantly in this creek bottom: grey oaks and hackberry. I admire these hackberries (*Celtis reticulata*), touching a dangling branch, a lovely small tree, gnarly, twisted, spare. I pluck some of the tiny withered berries to take home, try to make one grow in my yard. The botanist Donald Culross Peattie tells us in his *Natural History of Western Trees* that “Netleaf Hackberry is a bookish, if officially accepted English name for a tree that is called, where it grows best, in the Spanish-speaking parts of the Southwest, by the name of Palo Blanco, white tree. “In New Mexico,” he continues, “it seeks the desert washes—the gravelly beds of intermittent streams.” Peattie could have been standing here when he wrote these lines and maybe he was.

I spot a tiny movement, swing my binoculars around: ruby-crowned kinglets dangle on a hackberry branch. They’re just passing through on their way south. And over there, behind a prickly pear, a green-tailed towhee shows his lovely russet crest. Not many birds flit about in these mountains, but the dampness in the cañon nurtures life, draws insects, and so, discreetly, the birds gather. The steady drips of water, so disappointing to those of us looking for a scenic waterfall, are plenty enough wet to slake their thirst.

My attention now alert for birds, I spy a rock wren chattering and bobbing on a rock atop the cliff. Juncos flit by, white tail feathers tracing up and down, up and down, up and down again.

Meanwhile, the boys roll stones around, pocket anything with a glint of quartz, pebbling their future recollections of this place. I should be

keeping a protective fatherly eye on them, but I drift, drift, stare into the deep and cloudless blue; their chattering voices fade into a remote echo in my subconscious. If they get hurt, well, I reckon they'll yell and let me know about it. My legs stretch across the boulders. I look at myself and am struck by how alike in color my flesh is to these rocks, pale tan flecked with darker specks.

blue sky—
stone's coolness seeps
into my back

Sulphur yellow butterflies, in 1s, 2s, & 3s, dance through the air, spin, twist, jig. And that one, I guess, an Arizona sister. Just once, quenching the silence of all these stones, the long cascading trill of a cañon wren.

How much time passes? Minutes, hours, eons, moments. It would be easy to lose track. Rudely roused from my reverie by the boys, now bored with their play, I sit up, remember where and when I am, hop off the boulder, and we head back to town.

home from the hike—
pockets of stones
unloaded on the table

Fillmore Cañon

