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## *Body English*

by LINDA TATELBAUM

**R**OCKS, HE SAID. What you want to write about is rocks. He says this, rocking back in his chair in the little office he had before he moved into the big office with windows on two sides, the office a “distinguished professor of English” deserves but one he never filled in the same way he filled that other one, because by then he was dying. His last real office was the little one at the end of the hall, in between the two corner ones, and his door was always open and he would rock back in his chair and talk to you no matter how busy he was.

He never said that. He never said to write about rocks.

He says it now. In my head, in the little office in my mind where dead friends look me in the inner eye and tell me what to write. They’re full of good suggestions, these old friends. They dash them off to me as lightly as a scrawled memo, or rather like a feather blown my way without a care for the problem of language or leverage. These dead editors think everything is easy, and have no concern for how a living arm can’t just push a pen without being moved by some force mustered from . . . from where? From this little office in the mind where dead friends preside? They rock back in their chairs and smile. Force is exactly what doesn’t worry them now.

Okay. Rocks. What would he want to hear about rocks? Force is, in fact, the issue, the way you can’t move a big rock that’s sitting flat on the ground, but if you jack it up and get even one small round stone under it, get it off balance, it will move. He’d want to hear the way even the biggest rock will rise and sing to the clever dance of a well-placed fulcrum. The way, hot, a rock will generate more heat, as when you choose a July day to approach it with an iron bar, determined to pivot it up and across the grass with body english, marking its hot surface with speckles of your sweat. And the way, later, marked in your lower back by its obstinate weight, you come back to touch its cool texture in the dark, reading with your hand the blind story that words can never write.

So why does he tell me to write this Ice Age story that only the body knows, the story he wants to hear? I wonder, looking out the window at a big whitish slab left lying against the lilac roots, picturing the beautiful bottom step it would make with its square corners and even surface, building in my mind’s eye the next step upon the next till I’ve reached the upper bank behind the house, seeing too the lilies and delphiniums I will plant there, and the way the morning light will fall through tall pines and make swaying shadows on the stones, I wonder if I can ever

move that first and biggest stone, if Archimedes was right, that given a long enough pole and a place to stand I can move the earth. And I wonder where I can get such a lever, and what unimaginable planet I will have to stand on.

He wants me to write about force, and the consequence of solid objects. We've had these discussions before, two professors sharing our love of summer physics, his sailing, my stonework. We both understood the healing power of torque and twist, back, arms, eyes, minds, hands that make something move according to the law of the physically possible, after a year of working in the corridors of the institutionally possible. As I am healed by the vision of steps and garden walls, he would punctuate the teaching year by watching his boat cut through bay waters like a pen crossing a blank page, a pen making waves that wake and wake and wake until they hit the rocky shore, then turn and roll back out to sea. And if he didn't know before, now he surely knows all about the study of the unimaginable, and the untold story of the consequence of solid objects, which must be why he's saying to me, Write about rocks. With a pen long enough you can move anything, he's saying to me.

\* \* \*

"THAT THERE'S A twenty-five-dollar rock," the man says, poking at a whitish streak in the soil with the toe of his boot, pushing back a smudged John Deere cap to wipe a swarm of mosquitoes off his forehead. "She looks like a beaut. Want me to move her?"

"Naa, just dig it out," I say. "I can move it some other time, when I know where I want it."

He looks at me kind of funny. He looks at my husband. Kal nods, yes, she's the one moves rocks around here. They both shrug, and the man shakes his head. She does the rocks. That's a good one.

"Well, I'll get her out and put her over yonder for ye."

He mounts the throne of his yellow backhoe once more, having spent the afternoon chewing up the side yard to make way for a new dining room. He turns the key and black smoke belches out the exhaust pipe into the lilac bush. He lowers the jaws to the white outcrop, catches an edge of it. His wheels rear up, his body rises off the seat, and there's a disheartening scrape-groan that can mean potential trouble, ledge or something, a change of plans in where you thought you were going to build the addition. But the groan gives way to a grinding crunch as bedrock laid down long ago submits to the claws of the backhoe, and he lifts out a perfect white slab, four feet long, two feet wide, five inches thick, with sharp edges all around. He swings the bucket away from the building site and gently lands the rock against a pile of roots under the lilac bush. He finishes digging the holes for foundation piers, and then drives off down the one-lane dirt road.

And there it sits. Two years pass, as I study the slab from the new dining room window. A bottom step for an unbegun project. I watch the slab, but it does nothing. It sits. By now it's at least a fifty-dollar rock, its value inflated by the trendy upscale stonework going on in Camden, twenty miles from here on the

coast. Underground it was worthless. Now, sitting here, doing nothing, it's a commodity you can invest in. I know because I found a second rock, a big one by the side of the road, and that one got so valuable I almost lost it.

I'd had my eye on this other flat whitish one with a sharp corner poking out from under dead leaves and branches. The second step, perhaps, in my unbegun project. I walked by it every day, and sometimes stopped to poke my fingers down into the moss, curious just how thick this one would turn out to be. Then one day I heard a pickup truck rattle by on the dirt road. I heard the driver cut the engine. I ran down the driveway just in time to see him trying to move the thing out of the woods.

"Hey!" I shouted, running toward the truck.

He turned around, feigning innocence. "D'ya know who owns this here land?" he asked.

"I do."

"Want to sell this rock? Give yer fifty dollars for it. Or these stone walls? I pay b'the foot."

He motioned along the roadside, where old stone walls gathered light and shadow. These beautiful stones that were here before I was, before anyone was. Blood rose to my face. Deerflies circled my head. I tried to contain my rage.

"No," I answered.

"Suit yerself," he said, climbing into the cab of his truck and driving off. I stooped down and pulled branches to cover the big rock. I never knew geology could cause such personal consequences, that living along "the Bucksport formation" where all these flat building stones represent economic opportunity for a strong guy with a pickup, could turn me into a furtive old crank who goes around hiding rocks.

I'm strong too, but not like him, and I don't have a pickup. What I do have is a problem, because, while the other slab leans against the lilacs not ten feet from where I want it, this second step sits downhill and over a hundred feet away. What I do have is a vision, a desire to mend the split between body and words by building something that lasts. I pile on another layer of pine boughs while I think what to do. Another year goes by, my project unbegun.

\* \* \*

GRIEF IS PART of the story about rocks that Ed wants me to write, the residue, what's left when he is dead and so many are dead and so much is dying including myself and yet I'm left here to make something of it, and why, and what, and how?

Sometimes I feel like my work is futile, and dumb, dealing with words day in and day out, and yet inarticulate, inaccurate, useless. Sometimes I think that I truly prefer rocks to words. Rocks really matter. They are solid, not symbolic. They are. Really. If you've ever pinched your finger between two of them, you know. I've never pinched my finger between two words and had it hurt. Hurt is the criterion, I guess.

If it is, then I suppose words are real after all, because words can hurt. You have to be careful laying them in place, and once you have, they can define boundaries as strong as a stone wall. Maybe words are something like stones after all, I don't know. Maybe I'm missing something, some connection that would help me know what to do with the emotional trace, how you can return, changed, from every loss, and go on building. You can't always be wise. Sometimes you have to break down like an old stone wall and grieve. Grief is the condition of knowing the world for what it is, all of it, and not just dwelling in what you can hold onto, or what you can move. Grief contains the shadow of what was once desired, memory of what will be lost, like a rock showing a streak of granite, a fleck of mica.

How should I write about rocks anyway, when words can do no more than describe? The story of rocks builds upon the impossible, and follows a horizontal line which is itself an illusion since the earth is round. And yet there is a solid consequence in this illusion, at least in the story of how these rocks became a wall, how these words will turn into something he wants to hear.

\* \* \*

THE THIRD STEP showed up on the bank above the house, in the spot where we were digging to plant a pear tree. The shovel clanged with a kind of finality: that's it, dig no more. But we knew where we wanted the pear tree. Right here. So picks and boards and bars were brought to the site, and we went down on our knees. We dug up enough dirt to find the edges of it, then dug away one side of the hole so we could get some leverage with the long bar, poked it under and used another rock as fulcrum. While I bounced on the end of the bar to wobble it from its socket, Kal stuck progressively bigger and bigger stones under it until it stood at an angle it could not maintain, and we rolled it out of its place and onto a ramp of boards, and gravity took it down the bank. We planted the pear tree. It died before I ever did get that rock in place.

This third one was so big it was actually two steps, an eight-inch thick triangle with another eight-inch step built square onto it. The cross section where the two steps divide looked like some kind of volcanic fudge bar, little pieces of chopped black and silver embedded in layers of sandstone. It was so big, it made the first step look manageable, and sure enough, leaning up against the lilac roots where the backhoe man had so wisely placed it, off balance and eager to move, the perfect white slab turned out to be easy, using an iron bar, human hip and shoulder, to pivot across a series of smaller rocks that kept it off the ground until it came to rest near the base of a broken old stone wall just east of the house. Here the white slab, with its perfectly square corners, became the first stroke in the long-held vision of steps that would rise along the side of a raised flowerbed, ascend through a neat break in the reconstructed wall to the next level of ground, and more flowerbeds, ending with the huge triangular step pointing off toward the pines.

In such a project, poetry meets geology halfway, but a step is just a step after

all. It takes more than vision to turn found steps into a stairway that a person of any age can climb in moonlight as well as sun, with big feet or small, and to give them some good reason to climb it. It takes physics, it takes mathematics, it takes botany, it takes design. But above all, it takes rocks, lots of rocks, and some way to get them where you want them.

So it was down into the road to fetch the nearly-stolen step, Egyptian-style, three logs under it, rolling it by nudges of the bar, replacing one of the logs at the front each time it moved a little. This brought it out of the woods, and a big one it turned out to be, four feet long, three feet wide, eight inches thick. The dirt road never looked so steep before, leading from this low spot up to the driveway. What to do, what to do? The rock sat by the edge of the road, too close to abandon it now, too much in the way to leave it there for long.

No Egyptian solution presented itself. Instead, a Japanese one. The car, the Toyota we were about to trade in. Now, before we get the new one. The dealer will never have to know. I back the station wagon right down to the edge of the road. I erect a gentle incline out of three layers of plywood scraps, with some blocks of wood placed underneath for support. I nudge the rock as far up the ramp as the rolling logs will take it, then twirl it on the slippery plywood, each turn bringing it up closer to the bumper. Then with the rock lying lengthwise on the plywood, I raise the ramp to level by jacking more blocks under the end of it, then raise it one more so it's inclined slightly toward the car. I push the rock down off the ramp into the back of the car. I hop in the car and drive the rock home.

Still, it takes more than steps to make a stairway. There has to be a solid base to raise each perfect steppingstone to the next level in its rise. It happened that Kal was in the process of digging up what must have been an old barn foundation right where he was trying to plant a raspberry patch. The big flat stones that formed the old sills were obstacles to him, serendipity to me. We proceeded to wreck an old garden cart by using it to lift and haul one big stone after the next to the project site. The stairs climbed surely toward the break in the wall where the two-step triangle would be the final stone. These steps will last.

\* \* \*

THE OLD BARN, fallen over time and buried in soil, was here all along but we didn't know it. Grass and milkweed covered its story, and it became the earthy palimpsest beneath our story. The old barn was a sunken chapter in a 1770's story, land granted to Revolutionary soldiers, families raised to grow corn, wells dug and stone walls built not for beauty but to clear pastures. The tilted gravestones mark the 1870's as their last page. Kal and I wrote the 1970's chapter on top of their fallen barn, the story of two young dreamers coming to the land, gardeners and builders by choice. Of the old ones, only their lilacs remained to punctuate our story, and now the steps I am building out of their unburied sills. But we're all younger than we know, writing chapters that are pragmatic, aesthetic, civilized, the digging up of bedrock and the doing of something with it, laying out our vision with lines level and plumb, while underneath is an older

story, the Ice Age story that only the rocks know.

I say I am building something that lasts, stone walls and garden steps. I say this to assuage the pain of words that never seem to stay, breath giving out, ink fading. Yet grief has to be part of this story of rocks, too, because these walls will tumble and be buried under humus as my woodframe house subsides and slides into the bank and is gone. Leaves and needles will fall upon them, and the dying greens of all my lilies. Life gathers in layers, and without a human hand to sweep them clean, even rocks go under. And if I wish this were not so, a deeper grief presents itself: the prospect of a planet too hot to sustain the luxury of organic rot. Then nothing will bury the naked rocks. They will groan and crack and heave in the heat, but they will remain, telling their own parched story in which there is no grief except the residue of mine, like the thyme and moss that now trail from their crevices because I was here, planting what I could in the cool shade of the pines.

\* \* \*

LIGHTEN UP, HE says, throwing his head back until his glasses glint, laughing with white teeth and a flash of Adam's apple under his grey, clipped beard.

I laugh too, sitting with a yellow pad on my knee. We're having a meeting. He's come to my office this time, something he often did, a way of leveling the relationship between chair and colleague. Two chairs, then. I have some notes here. See if this makes any sense to you. From where you sit. Slightly outside, though we still hold you here. You dared me to write about something that can't be put into words. Which I did. Whether I succeeded or not, the result is an idea I have for revising the entire curriculum.

He laughs again, as one slightly outside will do about matters of curriculum. One does one's possible, he says, shrugging, and yet, I answer, one must consider the range of the impossible. One must have vision first, and then resort to physics. Surely you know that. As long as you're alive, everything is physics. He nods, perhaps a bit sadly, and reaches to pick up a white stone I keep on my desk, a stone that once sat, inert, on a beach till the day I used wheels to get myself there, used strides to walk the beach, used the light of day to see the stone reflected to my eyes, used hip and knee joints to bend down, hand to grasp what I wanted, hot from the sun, and lift it into my life. Yes, that stone is a good example of desire moving through physics. He passes it to me, still cool from the cool of his hands. I put it back on the desk and hand him my yellow pad.

Here, take a look at these notes. I'm trying to heal the split between body and language that drives me, every summer, from the word-heavy work we do here, to escape into stonework just as soon as I possibly can, sometimes even with a pile of bluebooks still waiting on my desk, pulling on old stiff work gloves bent to the shape of my hands, with holes in every finger so I don't even know what use they are but they give me a sense of power in the physical world. You were that way with sailing, too, admit it.

He smiles and takes the notepad from me, holding it lightly in one hand as he

reads. You want them to learn about goals, he says, looking up, and how to reach them.

Yes. They'd discover their goals through writing and art, then learn to achieve them by drawing on physics. This would be an interdisciplinary way of majoring in English. Call it Body English.

He gives me a curious look, waiting to hear more.

Think of this story I just wrote, the one about rocks. You think that was an easy assignment you gave me? I started it over and over again. It would not move. Kind of like a big rock lying flat on the ground. And why should it move? The rock needs some instability, some reason to move, some force. So maybe you have to try a come-along. You must know what that is—a hand-powered winch. You have to jack the rock slightly off the ground so you can get a cable under and around it, then attach the cable to a strong tree some distance away, not too far. Then you bring the cable back around to this little ratchet rig in your hand, which you squeeze and squeeze, and the rock moves toward the tree. Can you see how the image of a come-along helps the writer's struggle to get material in motion? For me to get this piece going, I had to stop lying flat. I had to give in to the instability of grief. And with you as my audience, I had a tree to loop my cable around. Then once I found a story to tell, how these rocks became a wall, the force of my pen could move along the narrative line with someplace to go.

I can almost see the shadow of sails in his eyes as he sits listening, the memory of ropes and rudders rippling in his shoulders and hands. So I seize the momentum of his interest, another writer's trick learned from physics, and I continue. Consider, I say, that even psychology is physics. How do we move through this dynamic web of relation called life, loving and wanting and growing and leaving? Language is one of the ways we reach for what we desire, or push it away. Language is one way we cover or unveil. Language creates the light or dark by which we interpret the emotional field. So why not?—Body English.

He raises his eyebrows in interested assent. Body English, he says, and takes a closer look at the notepad on his knee.

BOD ENG 200: VISION

*art, poetry, religion*

BOD ENG 300: ERGONOMICS

*dance, the human body, physics, design*

BOD ENG 400: LEVERAGE

*planning, psychology, writing*

BOD ENG 493: THE CULMINATING EXPERIENCE

*technical and survival skills, through an individual project in building, sailing, stonework, farming, or other field of physical endeavor, and a collection of poetry or stories.*



ADDITIONAL REQUIREMENTS, TO BE COMPLETED BEFORE 493:

1. *one course in a natural science allied with the planned 493 project;*
2. *outdoors experience, independently or through Outing Club, Woodsmen's Team, fieldwork in environmental studies, biology, geology, etc.;*
3. *20 hours of labor with the Physical Plant crew;*
4. *a journal, kept throughout the three years.*

Ed looks up from the yellow page and smiles. Why the hell not, he says, taking off his glasses and gazing toward the horizon which is an illusion because nothing is ever level and we are always going someplace that can't be reached.