

# THE EDGE OF THE CLEARING

*From time to time Snowy Egret invites established nature writers to share their thoughts and nature-related experiences with our readers. In this issue we are honored to have SUE FAGALDE LICK as our guest editor.*



## SMUGGLED ROCKS

PICTURE A ROCKY BEACH WHERE A SHALLOW RIVER MERGES into the Pacific Ocean. An eight-year-old girl kneels in the sand, fascinated by the stones and shells glittering in the sun. They are red and green and gold, glistening wet. Some are smooth and shiny amber or black, while others are rough and speckled or plain gray with white shells embedded in them. She reaches into the cold water and begins collecting the colored stones, loading them into the pouch of her blue hooded sweatshirt. She adds a mussel shell, a broken sand dollar, the jawbone of a fish.

"You can't take all those home," her father says.

"But, Daddy, they're so pretty."

"Put them back."

I didn't.

In the back seat of the Buick as we left Gold Beach, Oregon, my brother, Mike, squealed on me. "Susie's still got all those rocks."

My mother looked back from the front passenger seat and sighed. "You're getting sand all over everything. What are you going to do with those things?"

"I don't know."

But back in San Jose, I found lots of things to do with them. Some of them I used to decorate the bowl where my pet turtle, Pokey, lived his short life. The rest I carried around in the tall cardboard can that my Barbie knitting kit came in. I would empty them out onto the back lawn and build things, like forts or houses or castles. This rock was the chair. This one was the bed. This one was the sofa. I sat my dolls on them, corralled my plastic horses with them.

The rocks weren't as shiny after they dried out. Sometimes I'd get them wet in the patio sink and watch the bright colors until they turned dull again.

When I got a little older, I looked them up in books and glued some of them to a board, writing the geological names underneath, feeling very smart. Some rocks I couldn't classify; I just liked them.

I used the best flying rocks for hopscotch markers, tossing them to a square chalked on the pavement, grabbing them back up as I hopped over the square on one foot.

I used to hold one particular putty colored rock in my hand as a good luck charm.

Although many of the possessions of my childhood have disappeared, I still have those rocks more than four decades later. It wasn't easy to keep them. Every time I moved, someone would say, "You're not taking these rocks, are you?"

"Just put them in the trunk," I would reply. Sometimes I'd hand-carry them, hiding them under the jackets on the back seat.

It became a family joke. "Susie's taking her rocks with her again."

Once I grew up, I rarely looked at them. But thirty-seven years after I took those rocks and shells from Gold Beach, I moved to the Oregon coast. It would make a great story to say I returned these souvenirs to the place where I got them. But I didn't. Perhaps when I die, my descendants will do that, but for now I'm keeping them. A few of my rocks are on display in a glass case in my living room, but most of them are still in the Barbie can, its pink lid rusted from the year it spent in a leaky garage in Lincoln City.

As I take them out now, memories come rushing back, not so much specific events as sensations: Cool grass on a hot afternoon. The green, slimy smell of turtle water. A wet red rock with white zigzags dripping on my bare legs. Barbie perched like a nymph on a pick granite island. Here's the smooth red rock, here's the big green one, here's the one that looked like a castle. There's a flat gray stone filled with bits of shells and a smooth, round gray one that looks like a toe and has swirling rings like the planet Saturn. Here's a layered rectangle of rock built over hundreds of years. I find a white quartz pebble, a hailstone that will never melt. I rub a piece of smooth black obsidian, then pick up a long rough finger of gray rock touched with the same shadow of pink as a soft sunset over the beach. Here's a cockle shell, a sand dollar, a mussel shell, dogwinkles, an oyster shell. I pull out two fish jawbones that are still intact after all these years in the Barbie can. I laugh at a rough black rock that looks like a turd. Here's a piece of frosted glass. This flat white piece seems to be porcelain off someone's toilet tank. Why did I save these things? Where's that big rock? I think, then realize that this two-inch-diameter stone is it.

All of my rocks fit easily in the palm of my grown-up hand. I touch them carefully, marveling that nearly half a century has passed since I plucked them off the beach. As my parents die, as my husband and I grow old, as the economy crumbles, as the world suffers through another war, I find more comfort in these simple stones than in the many expensive things with which my house overflows. The stones feel good in my hand, hard and cool and strong.

These days I don't keep the rocks I find on the beach. I pick them up, admire them, and put them back to live the life they were meant to live, to be homes for tiny sea creatures, to be taken up by the waves and moved farther inland or out to sea, to slowly grow or to disintegrate where nature has placed them. I also leave them so that someone else can find them, perhaps another little girl who can't resist filling her pockets with treasures that she will carry around all her life and pull out when her hair is gray and everything else has changed.

—SUE FAGALDE LICK