



Cynthia Rowe
Stone Circles



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Stone Circles

Red Storm

darkening sky—
the unexpected
flapping of wings

I can hear the panic in her voice. I peer outside to find the horizon has turned red. The sun struggles through, a round ball haloed with dust. At the bottom of the garden, the pens rattle. Bantams run around in circles, bits of feathers and fluff flying through the air, adhering to the cage mesh.

The dog scratches at the wire screen, nails scraping at the wooden frame. His whine is almost a cough. A layer of tin lifts from one of the pens, as light as tissue paper in the wind. The corrugated iron cartwheels down the road. Stakes uprooted from the rose garden arc upwards like primitive spears. We tape the windows and prepare to sit out the gale.

early morning
cradling
freshly laid eggs

Late Again

We are having chicken tonight. The order has gone out for my brother to kill one of his brood. My father won't be back from his surgery until late. That's how it is, most nights. My brother, de-facto dad, man of the house while still a schoolboy, sighs and heads for the chook pen.

My eyes go huge from the moment he swings the axe. The hen leaps headless from the chopping block. Inside, Mother pulls down the blind, turns up the radio to drown out the sound of ominous flapping. I stand my ground while the bird, blood pulsing from its neck, goes round and round in diminishing circles . . .

iceberg roses—
red spots
on the grass

As we busily pluck feathers, the phone rings. I can tell the conversation is tense. I know that, once more, my father will be absent from the dinner table.

Interrupted

He inserts Water Music into the player, a supposed inspiration, before handing me a slab of clay. I take the length of wire, slice the earth in two, and slam it on the table. Cut, roll. The wire hums with creativity. The clay is slippery to my touch. In one corner of the room, the kiln chuffs out heat. Beads of perspiration drip from my brow, adding to the mix. I mould and push, urging the argil to take shape. “Shall I open the door?” he suggests. Engrossed in my task I nod.

A train rattles past, the 6.33 to Toorak. It is cooler now but the screeching wheels set my teeth on edge. My mind becomes laden with commuter sounds, the sight of tired men hefting briefcases. I sit back, let myself be lulled by Handel.

summer evening
five pebbles clenched
within my fist

Late in the Day

She used to be so elegant, so proper, often critical of others' behaviour. I watch as Gran tips the hot tea from the cup into the saucer and back again. Back and forth the tea slops. "We're late," she says. "This is the only way to cool it." I'm not thirsty, but don't want to offend. She used to be so immaculate. Wisps of hair float around her face. Her cheeks are flushed, her hands unsteady.

autumn afternoon
rose petals
on the ground

Incandescence

I see her on TV, her smile radiant as she talks about her art, those towering structures of bronze and clay. And she mentions her father. They even show a photo of him holding a fish, his catch, in the air. I remember the night he and I became lost on our way to the dance, arrived, oh, perhaps an hour late. Quite innocent, of course. But no one believed us. Now I look at his daughter on the screen, glowing with life, with enthusiasm for her cause, her achievements. And I recall . . . just . . . the cool of the car, the eucalypts flashing past, the headlights picking out the stony road ahead . . .

through a dark sky
the man in the moon
tinged with cream

Certainty

2 p.m. I can hear it now . . . the umpire's whistle, sharp and peremptory, shrilling through a chilly sunshine. Saturday afternoon, the solid feel of life, of constancy, of a time of certainty, of seasons and elm trees. Leaves shrug into heaped piles, cloying pyramids kicked at by children wearing long socks and lace-up shoes. Boots resound on leather and, in this stadium, and on each patch of dew-filled grass, the big men fly. On it goes and I change, and others change, but the ritual stays the same . . . the referee's flute trilling through a low, inclusive sky.

bare branch
the fogged windows
of a crowded tram

Use-by Date

Two matching topiaries, skinny and cautious, sway on the upstairs balcony. The labels say 'Wild Cherry' but the plants appear identical to the Lilly Pilly pair you jettisoned for daring to become woody. The day is overcast. An autumn wind rattles the horticultural tags together, a clapping of plastic castanets. I turn over your postcard from Paris to examine the image of an oh-so-neat Jardin des Tuileries.

council clean-up
the pardalote builds its nest
in a carpet roll

Le Mariage

He neglects to tell me, until the morning of the wedding, that the groom's mother is expected to escort her son down the aisle. French custom, he explains. Of course, he and his fiancée are already 'married'. Ah yes, another French custom. The first marriage took place at the *mairie*—town hall—on the previous Saturday.

As I accompany him down the aisle of L'Église Notre-Dame de Versailles, I can't help but notice the tourists watching the ceremony. They loll against the pillars in sweatpants and sneakers. Some click cameras. Our friends, who have flown from Australia to be here, appear bemused to see the Mother of the Groom on the arm of her nervous son.

Bondi wedding
a rose petal surfs
the breakers

Consultation

We sit there discussing my spine, whether I have stress fractures—normal at my age. He recommends exercises for my knee, which he claims shows signs of muscle atrophy. *Such a short time after the accident!* I exclaim. Our eyes stray to each other's jewellery.

This musculoskeletal specialist sports a substantial diamond on his right hand, while I am wearing my trusty engagement ring—reset more than once over the years. He tells me to contact him if there is no improvement, if I feel the need to talk things over. As I stand to leave he steals one final glance at the sapphire on my left hand. Under the surgery's fluorescent lighting, the stone winks a rainbow of colours.

anniversary . . .
tram tracks burnished
by the setting sun

The Outsider

Wildlife is rare in the grounds of the school where I teach; only scraggy sparrows peck at dropped orange peel. Today, sounds of discord filter along the corridor. I pause in the classroom doorway. I've never witnessed teenage girls fight before, not physically kick and punch. At my feet, two puce-faced pupils wrestle on the scuffed linoleum. Outside, cars and low-loaders grind past. A panicky thought: *Is the leadfilled air causing this madness?* Praying reason will prevail, I wave my copy of Camus. The eruption dissipates. Dust motes swallow up the taunts. I turn the pages and adolescent energy drifts to the self-centredness of Meursault.

grey sky
a truck changes gear
on the overpass

Time Ticking

fallen seedpod
where waves crash
on the rocks below

The numbers are small, but the group is involved. The students are enjoying Paul Verlaine's poem *Chanson d'Automne*. The class to follow will be unruly, and not looking forward to the test I have planned. Without warning, the loudspeaker crackles. The measured voice of the Principal announces: *Would all classes please move down into the quadrangle.*

We stand in the wintry sunshine in rows. A chill wind blows off Port Phillip Bay. Trucks trundle past and I know this is a bomb scare, second this month. We wait until our toes are blue, until the breeze creeps into our bones. Finally the police give the all-clear, just before the last bell rings.

homework—
she paints one nail red
the next vermilion

Future Conditional

The semester is drawing to a close and the men in grey coats are back. They check the perimeter, press buttons, measure the lead levels . . . particularly near the overpass.

Upstairs, I edge between the desks, make encouraging noises. The class pores over the exercises, muttering in Greek, rather than the French they are studying. I pause at the window to watch the men in grey coats confer. They point at the clog of trucks, the throbbing cars. Exhaust pipes spew toxic emissions, and I turn to find hands shooting up. The students' faces are alight with the answers.

halloween . . .
from under a witch's hat
the whites of her eyes

Angel Chapel

We file into the tiny chapel to one side of St John's Anglican Church. The pews are overflowing with mourners, friends of this man who led a long and accomplished life. Some, unable to find a seat, are forced to stand at the rear. I examine the deceased's smiling photo on the Order of Service. The sea is in the background and he appears contented, at one with nature.

Our driver—an Indian who migrated from Canada to find better opportunities in this country—waits in his limousine.

funeral cortege
a fertility charm swings
from the limo mirror

Stone Circles

The cemetery gate closes behind me with barely a squeak. I tiptoe past the neat mounds. Edged with rough stones, each grave is like a mini Stonehenge. Burial sites have been pegged with rock slabs by grieving parents. The makeshift headstones are unmarked, secured with rusty wire or hemmed by earth. Pennyweight Flat—1852, named for little value. No hope for alluvial fortune in this ground. Only the remains of mites, uncoffined, unregistered. Children cut down by diphtheria, typhoid and dysentery—by a creek polluted from the sluicing. Shaken, I stand in this paddock of bones. The tombs are as small as a newspaper page, tiny as words before the Rush.

spring frost
stone circles
beside my feet

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