

The Australian National University

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Rockolalia, Lithomania

Biographical note:

Barbara Holloway is a Visiting Fellow in the School of Cultural Inquiry researching the writers and residents of South-West NSW for a publication on locative literature and ecology. Her most recent publication is 'The tree and its voices', *AJE* 2011. She was joint contributing editor of *Halfway house: the poetics of Australian spaces*, (UWAP 2010) and is currently an editor of *Australasian journal of ecocriticism*. Parts of her PhD, 'There or Nowhere at All: Race, Place and Gender in Australian Poetry 1808–1938', appeared in *Westerly*, *Southerly* and *Antithesis*. Her fiction, also exploring place and ecology, has been published in journals and collections. Canberra is currently her hometown and her bush home is the Danandbilla Range near Young NSW.

Stones are made of the most refined spirit energy (*chi*) there is, though all things are formed of *chi*. Stones are thought of as both the bones of the earth and kernels of energy.

I climb the range every few months.

All of us living on the slopes go up at different times. We refer to it as 'the mountain'. It rises a thousand metres and there's no track; we push between whippy callitris pine that grows so close together it scratches our skin, and the twigs dead or alive catch at our clothes, poke our eyes as we push up, hoisting our boots over loose stones and fallen trees, navigating between rocks that get bigger the higher we go. The farmland looks beautiful, stretching to the horizon but it's an "endangered ecological system". Once, a few hundred thousand years ago just out there was a lake.

Half-way up, puffing and hot, we have to stop, turn our backs to the range and look out on air, crops, stock. Fence lines on flat tree-dotted paddocks form the view clear away to the curve of the horizon in the west. Straight down, our dirt lane runs between eucalypts and scattered roof-tops.

Facing the hillside and climbing again as the range gets steeper behind slabs of stone split by centuries of alternating frost and heat. It's all very well imagining how it is for an eagle. Facts are for the bodies living here, making sense of what we walk and work on every day. I've scrutinised these rock surfaces for any signs left by all the humans who must have moved along here. Mostly there's just lichen. Rock loves lichen. Lichen loves rock so much it gives off a rich, clean smell as the sun heats the stone it lives on. Orchids come up in angular pockets of soil between paths made by the wallabies and kangaroos.

Once we get to the top, granite rocks as big as garden sheds balance on each other and the range opens out onto grasses, flowering scrub, big stringy-barks and kurrajongs. Someone has made a small cairn of flat rocks. I add a stone and start to slither down the hillside before it gets dark.

It took years to learn I'd bought a thirty-hectare rock garden. From the distance, you wouldn't guess. From the lane you see Stafford's Range rising in a pale tussock skirt. My small house is midway up, then the ground rises steeply and ribs of rock begin to show between the thick green and grey patterned trees. The rock isn't dead. Far from it.

I just had to stop thinking garden, paddocks and crops, give up dividing the block into uses.

Japanese and Chinese stone and rock gardening is a good way of thinking about it, but it doesn't deal with a central issue – are we humans here types of stone, or are we just experiencing rocks? Certainly we're soft perishable tissue, in a loose association made by the rocks and stones that surround and bind us. The roos and magpies and

goannas visit us all, we walk under the same trees that grow up between stone, the wrens and robins and parrots pass each of us at the end of the day heading back into the grasses or hillside. How does rockiness fit in? How were we attracted here where easiness isn't part of our environment, but nor is simple resentment.

Spirit stones are special. Where they come from and what 'sort' they are doesn't matter, their strangeness matters.

The selection and the setting of the stones is one of the most difficult aspects of garden-making, especially the concept of requesting moods of the stones.

We didn't make the stone garden, though bad farming has contributed.

Whatever symbolic meaning ultimately emerges should do so naturally and is secondary to a satisfying design.

Stone has an orientation and a 'face' that must be turned towards the main viewing position when it is set in place. The face is said to be the side that most expresses the character of the stone and contains no unsightly blemishes.

The last owner of my place – the ex-Sydney, ex-pastry-cook dope-fiend – put up the shed, then the house, and then he arranged rocks. He lined rocks up in curves and circles, along paths, round individual trees, around nothing in particular. He arranged them to hold down the wallaby-proof netting round his crop hidden up the hill. Maybe it was that stone arrangement caught the eye of the police when they choppered along the Range. He lost his crop, lost probably a whole year's income and went close to a jail sentence.

He went on stacking stones by the doors – stones coloured by ores and minerals, stones with a hole he said was a window to other worlds. And he believed in a good end-rock. At each side of the bridge across the wash-down, even on fences, he sat great round boulders like fossil wombats.

One hot day I filled the bowl between rocks he'd cemented for a bird bath and two parrots came almost immediately. They were eye-buzzingly bright against the rock and dry lichen and suddenly what he'd done and why got through to me. There aren't going to be any garden plants, stock or even a horse here. It's a thirty-hectare rock garden.

'You ever worried about anything, or anything frightens you at night,' Tony, my northern neighbour said, back at the beginning. 'You ring me, I'll be straight over.' He added, 'And just give us a call if you're wanting anything slaughtered. Teena and Tony, we're your mobile butchers'.

We all have other jobs, fanning out on the web of lanes and roads made for such life-sustaining cash flows. Tony heads off at 5.30 every morning to work at the Abattoirs in town, as he's headed off to the abattoirs in one town or another since he was fifteen. He's a big man, a drinker and an ex-smoker with crow's feet around his eyes and a fox-coloured moustache.

'Richard-my-brother and I are closer again these days,' he told me a while ago. 'Specially since he left that wife of his. She wouldn't let him see anyone. Isn't that right Teen? We weren't good enough! I sent him cards and that for his birthday. I'd ring up to wish him Happy Birthday. She'd say he wasn't there, and she never told him. He never ever got our cards. We were common!'

A five-metre cliff on a wash-down near the house shows the stone and rock packed straight from the surface who knows how far down. Dry steep creek-beds called wash-downs have formed by aeons of water running off the range. The soil's sandy and rain just disappears into the hill. It's very dry for all of us. Has been for years. In the ten years I've been here, rain comes down hard when it comes. It hits the ground running and flows away in a frothing brown sheet of soil, humus, dead leaves and twigs, exposing more stones on the surface. A trickle of water reaches the old, real, creek across the lane.

Yet there is water. My place had two huge tanks and a bore with an underground pump when I bought it. The bore driller's invoice listed what they found underground:

0 to 2 metres at the top – sand & rocks
 2m down to 35m – granite
 35 down to 90m – loose sand
 90 and 95 metres – water in a band of sandstone.

What you can see from the surface is how, as the trees grow and push down for moisture and stability, they push up rocks so they have a frill around the base. Winds often rip across the hillside and trees that blow down have rocks clutched in roots which have grown horizontally.

As for where people drink: Brian, my southern neighbour, said, 'Always wanted my own bar,' and built the Crow Bar among the pines next to his house. He put in a gate so we don't have to climb through the fence going home. And last winter he built the outdoor oven. The possums have developed a real taste for pizza. We've had some great parties but it was just regular Happy Hour when I was talking to Anna, our one true farmer and owner of 500 hectares of rich, flat, drought-stricken land. I told her the wallabies aren't drinking from her creek any more, they rely on me.

'Creek, what creek?' she said. 'Three pools left, thrashing with carp, stinking of ducks. It's terrible. I'm ashamed of it.'

'It's always run,' she says, 'always, no matter how long we'd had a drought. I don't know why I feel so bad about it when we're not doing anything different.'

It's definitely not because of anything she's done.

She goes on, 'Well, Sullivan's Creek over the Range, it's still running and it's nice and clean. It's just ours that isn't.'

We say, 'It's all the silt and soil washed off the hills. The bed's filling up with sand slugs'.

She makes her face twist, like, yes true, but it's not the real issue.

'I don't know what's happening to the creek water,' Brian says. 'But in No-Eyes' book, that prophecy book I was telling you about, that's what it says – "The people who save water are the ones the world will need".'

'That's what it says, does it?' She goes on: 'It used to be that we'd take the little backhoe down there, you'd dig down in the sand a couple of feet, and there'd be this lovely clear water. We'd water the sheep that way. We dug down a few days ago, and there wasn't even water. This black wet stuff came up, and it smelt, it smelt *awful*. I don't know if someone's used up all the underground water. I think they must have'.

Her two boys are back from Queensland, that's why she tried digging for water. The boys, young men, work on geological survey team for a mining company. Three weeks up there, one off at home. It's difficult but the place can't support her and the boys.

Then she goes on with, 'The river-gums – the top leaves on them are curling up, like they haven't got enough water. I hate looking at them'.

Back in my own house that night, I thought I could hear something, maybe something alive, but it was just the plastic bag kind of settling down after I took bread out for breakfast. I went outside in the moonlight and a possum came straight up, stopped in front of me, leant forward and bit my foot. Crazy. Do I look like a pizza?

My house is on a concrete slab right on the ground. Once last winter four echidnas, and another time six, came stumping along the verandah one behind the other. Echidnas are usually seriously ungregarious, like I said, oblivious to everything except ants. Not this time.

The first one stopped near the door. One by one the others stopped. None of them moved. Suddenly the first one walked off in a totally different direction; the others set off behind, same order, same pace, and they disappeared between the trees. It looked pretty funny. Anna says that's an echidna train; the front echidna is female, and her well-behaved admirers follow in precise order of echidna importance. It only happens once a year.

Classical Japanese rock gardeners say sensual beauty is reduced to the faintest smile
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Another book does say, 'Stone gardens have pleasing incongruities and unexpected harmony'. The stroll-garden is my favourite. The intense, echidnas have to be stroll-gardeners. I meet them everywhere: down the paddock, round the house, up the hill, always by themselves, digging, signing the bottom of each hole with a final push of their pencil-thin nose, shouldering rocks and logs aside to get at the ant-rich ground.

Echidnas' stomachs have no digestive acids other than the formic acid provided by the ants they eat. Perhaps ants are the *chi* of *chi*.

I read that a monotreme researcher shut an echidna in his kitchen one night, (we won't even wonder about this) and next morning he found his fridge moved to the middle of the room. The size of boulders I see they've moved aside shows they're little bulldozers in perpetual motion, pausing to dig, trundling on with a strange wallowing walk as if they have no brakes.

One at a time they come up the track to the bird-bath on hot days. They clamber laboriously over the edge and lie down in the water. They might stay for five minutes, resting and scratching, immersed except for their snout. They climb out as carefully as they get in, pause, then lumber away through the trees, leaving a trail of damp sandy footprints fading on the stone.

The expression *ishitate-so* means 'stone arranging priest' in *kare sansui*, the Stone-and-Sand-Garden.

'Yeah, we certainly got plenty of rocks out here. They drop out of the bloody sky! Just got to work around them somehow. See, the rain still comes up as a little spring in those old spots, right down the bottom of the hill it comes up. Must be bedrock under it all.'

I'm conferring with Tony. He's going to slow the run-off by ripping some trenches across our paddocks with his tractor.

But it was his mother he really wanted to talk about.

'It's only a few weeks since she had a couple of little strokes, she went in for x-rays and they found this great big lump. Richard-my-Brother rang and told me. The doctors told him she only had a twenty per cent chance of surviving the operation and if she didn't have it she'd die.

'I asked Richard, "Have you told Mum what the doctor told you?" and he said "Not yet, I'm just going round there". I rang later, "What she say?" and Richard said "She took it pretty well. She just said 'Oh. Oooh"'.
'

'Then Thursday I was working right up near the back fence, and Teen come up the paddock and she told me. She said: "They just rang from town. Y'mum's passed away". She'd gone, that same night. She just had a heart attack that night.'

He clears his throat.

We talk about the grey thrush building its nest by his back verandah, whether Cumpy the cat might get it. There are multitudes of birds, tiny grass-dwellers, honey-eaters coming for the flowering iron-barks, migratory dollar-birds and bee-eaters that come to make nests burrowed into the sandy soil. We have endangered species all right; it's hard to cop it when Teen tells me she's shot another hawk or goanna 'hanging round the chickens'. Just as likely to be there for the mice that come for the chook feed, in my opinion, but I can't convince her.

'Anyway, why the F ... can't you make the chook house safe instead of shooting them?'

'Oooh, they're too smart, you couldn't fence them out.'

Yeah right.

Scholars debate whether Zen has any part in the rock- and stone-garden.

The art of the Zen garden is one that evolved in tandem with a spiritual imperative to eschew the irrelevant and transient in favour of the essential, enduring truths of nature.

When I got to the Crow-Bar last month, Suze from down at the crossing was in shock.

'Normally I don't leave the phone on, right. Friday night, I forgot to turn it off and it started ringing. It woke me up, and I'm like "Hello? Hello!" and the phone cut out, then it rang again and this voice keeps saying "Is Patrick Foster your son?" I just went sooooo cold and my voice is shaking, because he was still out, I knew that. "Yes?" "It's the police. He's been in an accident." I felt so sick, only then he said "He's not hurt". He said Paddy and his friend were okay, but Steve's there in bed going "Who is it, Darl, what do they want?"

'All the way into town I'm saying "I'm going to kill the little bastard", then I go, "No I'm not, he's alive, he's still alive", and I get to him and I'm running my hands all over him going "Baby, are you all right?"'

No Happy Hour at the Crow Bar since, but we had a shoot at the Pistol Club tucked into the old quarry. We usually have a tea or a beer after the guns are locked up.

It's like an earth tremor has shaken up Suze's little place.

She says, 'He must've had his foot flat on the floor, he sideswiped a tree, you know those big old trees there, went right up on the kerb, sideways right along this fence then bounced onto the concrete and three of the tyres blew. They went a bit further, the guts fell out of the whole engine, and it stopped. You can see by the tyre-marks exactly what happened.

'He said, "Look Mum, I was going fine 'til Jason panicked me. He started shouting 'It's the cops!' and they've got their flashing lights and siren on and Jason's saying 'Go left! Go left!' on Stafford's Road".'

'So he turned left. They were so lucky. They were just so lucky.'

There are cairns of stones on the lower slopes people made fifty or a hundred years ago. They're not memorials except in the sense of memorialising the kids, mostly, who picked up the stones after school or instead of going to school, to maximise grass for sheep. Lower, hollows where giant ironbarks had grown are filled in with rocks to let them plough, there are long banks of stones holding back nothing except a local myth that the original owner hid gold under one. I come along and re-lay the rocks across the hillside in new lines to hold the new gold, silt, I hope.

A stone is set in such a way that a good portion may be buried below ground. This is important to lend a visual sense of stability and naturalism to the stone setting and to insure actual stability. Undercuts towards the base should be hidden to avoid the impression of instability.

Suze works at the chook sheds, collecting and washing eggs. She wants her boys to do something easier for a living, something with a bit of certainty and better paid. She had to take a day off for Patrick's court case.

'He was twice above the limit, the alcohol he'd drunk. He's lost his Ls, that'll be for at least 12 months. And he'd been looking forward – like *aching* – to get his license, so he could take me to work and drive himself to school. He just couldn't wait and I just said, "You really stuffed up".

'We just don't know how big the fine'll be, that's what I'm worried about, I don't have fine money. He'll have to take a job anywhere he can get it just to pay the fine off. So now he stopped going to school. That's not what I wanted.'

She'll stay at the Crossing. He'll move on next year. How would he get to work? Besides, there isn't enough company out here to make a young bloke want to stay.

I got one of those phone calls this morning – it was someone who said she was just doing a quick survey about use of lawn mowers, not selling anything.

I start to laugh.

'All I can see out the window,' I say, 'Is stones'.

'So you don't use garden tools?'

'We like our rocks. The wallabies eat down everything between them and the trees.'

She thanks me for my time.

A simple, consistent classification scheme for stone arrangements is virtually impossible to develop because of the great varieties of stones and the different names that have been given them.



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