

The Landscape in my Backyard

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The stones are round, all of them. Uniformly round. All polished, to a greater or lesser degree, circular or oblate or elliptical.

They are not native here. They were born miles to the east, in the Santa Rita Mountains.

They were borne miles to the west, toward the Santa Cruz, the Holy Cross River.

They were born as limestone or granite or, mostly, as volcanics – a score of different volcanics, molten rock that froze and solidified into tiny crystals after erupting from the earth.

The rocks rose with the Santa Ritas, and they broke. Their natural fractures were exposed in outcrop as sharp angles on the hillsides, durable crags that seem changeless. Yet they succumbed slowly to chemical and physical weathering, broken down bit by bit by strong winds and weak acids and humble lichens until they lost support beneath and toppled down the cliff, waiting months and years and decades and millennia for the oh-so-infrequent rains, the monsoons and gentler winter showers that washed them down the mountainside at a pace much slower than a glacier: the pace of erosion in the desert. Then the chance step of a bighorn sheep might dislodge them, doing five hundred years of work in an instant.

And as they fell, they smashed into each other and they broke. Again and again. The large pieces became smaller pieces, and the sharp edges gradually became, as the geologists say, subangular. For as the pieces struck each other, those angled edges were bashed most often and they were the first to go, beaten flush with the rest of the surface. They fell into the rills on the hillside, tumbled down the rills to where those became gullies, and opened into arroyos, where they shattered more frequently against others.

Once they fell to the valley bottom, time and transmutation quickened. For there they were exposed to more water, the rarest but most powerful force in the desert as well as the most mystical. Yes, the water fell rarely, but it fell in torrents. Those torrents were brief but powerful, for the slopes from the Santa Ritas to the Santa Cruz are steep, and the canyons and quebradas are narrow, and water confined there can destroy anything that man can build. And, there is the power of time.

The stones poured out of the funnel of the canyon and onto a fan of rock debris battered by ephemeral deluges. There the boulders steadily shrank to cobbles, and the cobbles turned into pebbles. Most of the pebbles matured to sand; the lesser minerals were destined to become clay.

Powerful floods, raging suddenly down dry washes, flowed as brown as the desert, colored more by sand and silt than by water, sludge driving the heavier boulders and cobbles along at the bottom and collapsing steep banks as it crashed into corners. The next year's monsoon shifted the channel at that collapse, slicing a new course that could remain separate only for a short distance before rejoining the original downstream. But each coulee filled slowly, choking gradually in sediment, and thus the valley transformed itself into a highland.

This was the prolonged but incessant cycle of building and destroying, always moving the rocks farther from their womb in the mountains and closer to the river.

And ever more round. Ever more round, until the point miles from the mountains where all were round.

The highland was stable for a hundred or a thousand or five thousand years, and bit by bit a meager soil developed. And the grass came, and then the mesquite, the mobile cholla, the greasewood, and the giant saguaro, which found the surface longlasting enough to grow three or four or half a dozen arms. Like the outcrops in the mountains, the plain looked as if it had been there forever and would stay there longer still.

An ancient people came and camped seasonally, living perfectly in tandem with that place, giving and taking in small amounts that left few scars on the land, hardly noticeable. But they were Man, not Nature, and they broke different things differently. They broke things miles downstream from the outcrops, unfortunate ruinous breakings of pots into sharp pieces that lay on that soil where all else was round. Accidental breakings of half-finished arrowheads that cracked where the minerals in the host rock were not perfect, arrowheads not sharp in the manner they were intended and thus tossed aside, to be the only jagged objects among millions and millions of round ones.

Yet their ultimate fate was the same as all the other fragments. In the fullness of time, the floods came and displaced the adjacent ravine anew, eroded closer and closer until this flat plain evolved again to a steep bank, and the manmade squarish potsherds and the elegant elongated quartz points tumbled into the stream, where they shattered against harder stone and gradually become as round as their brothers, unrecognizable in the bottom of the wash.

Only a few would remain where they first broke. The pots were the same color as the desert dirt from which they were formed, with only a slight difference in texture; the points were of white rocks like many others. They were mute, yet their shapes communicated volumes to those with the eyes to distinguish.

Those unnaturally sharp edges were the clue: one in a million, but one nonetheless. A hide scraper or meat cutter, perhaps, flaked from a larger stone to just the size and shape that fit smoothly into a human hand, but chipped carefully again and again on the other side to produce an edge as sharp as a scalpel. There was not one chance in a billion that it was natural: it was a certainty that the sharp intellect and practiced hand of man had fashioned it from the one particular type of rock that could best constitute it.

An eye that has seen other artifacts notices those sharp edges. A hand reaches down and lifts the scraper. This particular rock, this extreme rarity, forms the connection between the maker and the finder. When she picks it up, she searches the ground nearby for another, but then casts her eye around and sees nothing but desert. Can this really be the work of man, and not just coincidence? She sees only dirt, cactus, a dead mesquite. No water. How could they have done it? How did they survive here – and not just survive, but flourish? Where are they now? She sets the rock gently back onto the ground by the traces of the broken bowl.

This is the story of the rocks. Of sharp rocks becoming smooth and then made sharp again, only to be slowly smoothed one last time. Things go round and round with the power of time, the constant cycle

of addition and subtraction. Man is but a tiny piece here, perhaps temporary, certainly tentative. Given enough time, all will be round again.

Submitted by Kevin Allison, March 22, 2023
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