

The Grassic Gibbon Centre
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The Weight of Our World

By Jenna Fults

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Deep beneath our feet, at its molten core, the Earth is endlessly forging itself. The mantle bubbles and boils at temperatures far beyond any on the surface, cooking primal, liquescent rock as it melts and thickens. It is a constant process, patient and on-going. But the planet has time—were these ancient processes dictated by such a concept—more time than can even be imagined.

For those who care to notice, there is an odd murmur within. It whispers: I have a story to tell.

Listen. Listen.

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In the suburbs of San Francisco, 1962, a boy awaits his sentence.

The news, when it arrives, is worse than he could have ever imagined. He had hoped his father might devise less excruciating ways to exercise child abuse over the summer. Cleaning the garage, for example. Mowing the lawn. Picking up bags of trash around town. Even a week in juvenile detention would be preferable, in his teenage mind.

'Am I being punished?' he interrogates.

Thomas's father lays out his daily newspaper, snaps it to rigidity. 'Don't be ridiculous,' he says. 'It'll do you some good to get out of town. The air here'll make you sick in the head after too long.'

'I don't see *you* skipping town,' Thomas says, accusingly.

'I didn't blow a week's worth of classes to get high in the park,' he returns from behind the pages, equally accusatory.

Still, Thomas protests: 'Grandpa's nuts. All he does all day is look for rocks. *Rocks*. I'll go mad. Cuckoo. Looney. Loco in the head.'

'Look. Thomas. It would make your mother happy, finally getting to spend time with him, properly. The old man hasn't seen you in years,' his father says.

'Well, she's dead, so what does it matter, anyway?'

It's worse than slinging the vilest profanity—"dead" is a dirty word, nowadays. A fresh wound, only a year old. The newspaper folds down so that his father can look him hard in the eyes. Grieving looks different on him, like sorrow so hardened that it transforms into anger. Anger at the world. Anger at himself. Anger at him.

'You're going, and that's that. I don't want to hear you complaining about it, either, or you'll be spending the next summer with him as well,' he says, and the paper goes back up. End of conversation.

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Deep in the magma-bed, silicate molecules merge with oxygen and crystallize, like water into ice. Minerals form as the rock leisurely cools, chemical compositions colliding to bring new forms into being.

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Two days later, he's deboarding the plane. The first step onto Colorado dirt feels like landing on the moon—the atmosphere is alien, the dryness of the air sucking moisture from his skin, mouth, lips. The day, too, is strange. Whereas the California heat invades from all sides, wet and impenetrable, here it is a dust haze. A transient veil, like the other half of a shadow.

The greeters rush forward to meet their disembarking friends, family and lovers as they emerge into the light of the afternoon. A dark form passes over his vision.

'Hey, kiddo.'

Thomas looks up at the man with whom he'll pass the summer. His grandfather is smaller than he remembers, stick-limbed and scrawny but with a hardness like rock. He looks nothing like Thomas's mother, but there is a familiar spark about his eyes.

They don't speak for the first half of the journey in his grandfather's antiquated green jeep. Thomas leans window-side, gazing over passing vistas, towering pines, arching rock structures. The boredom threatens to drown him.

'I'm being punished, aren't I?' he finally says.

'Do you feel like you're being punished?' his grandfather asks.

Thomas shrugs. 'It was only the one time, you know. It's not like I'm some criminal.'

They drive up the long highway through Colorado Springs for a small eternity before turning onto a side road, passing a large, weather-worn sign beaten into the hard ground with white-painted lettering: *Vista Verde Rock Shop, next right*. The lot is just another mile down the gravel road, four miles from any other property. The house sits on the valley slope on a bed of red soil, hunkering beneath a pair of pines. The rock shop entrance is out front, on the basement level. They go around and in through the back door.

They greet his grandmother, a stout woman with white hair and clothes perfumed to high heaven. Here is where his mother got her form: brown eyes, small lips, sharp chin. They show Thomas to his room. There's not much there, just a bed, drawers and a small bathroom. He doesn't mind the sparseness; far more unnerving is the silence. Outside, there are no siren screams or honking horns, none of the busyness and bustle of San Francisco—only the darkness that he brought with him, cowering in the corners.

His grandfather watches, leaning on the doorway. 'This was your mother's room, you know.'

Thomas stiffens. Suddenly, he is afraid to touch anything. She springs to his mind unbidden, as she always does when he's given time to think.

'She always loved the view,' his grandfather says, and Thomas nods mutely.

'Come on.' He waves him forward. 'I'll show you the shop.'

The basement shop is more a museum than a store. Rocks and minerals and gems line glass counters under dim, orange lighting. His grandfather drones on in a strange, geologic language: Brazilian fire opals, pink quartz, tiger-eye. He extends his hand over another counter, listing more foreign artifacts: malachite, white jade and, he winks, 'dinosaur bone.'

This, at least, catches Thomas's attention. It is an object far more spectacular than the rows of jagged mineral and hardened rock: a small sliver of fossilised bone, uprooted from a dry riverbed. Something from another world—living death.

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The pressure of the heavy rock pushes up the light magma and, with nowhere else to go, it squeezes through the cracks of the core and rises through the Earth's crust. It is a dense, sticky substance, too thick to push easily through. Pressure begins to build, slowly at first, but it is the first sign promising great and terrible disaster.

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The next morning, after a restless sleep, he is awoken by a knock at the door. 'Time for rock-hunting, my boy!' his grandfather calls. He opens the door with a ready-made smile, wearing cargo trousers and a wide-brimmed hat.

Thomas stares at him from the bed, blinking away sleepiness. 'No, thanks.'

'It's going to be a *very* boring summer if you sleep it away, kiddo.'

'I'm fine,' Thomas reiterates, head slumping back on the pillow.

Not a man to be deterred, his grandfather changes tactic: 'I'll tell you what—if we find a bone, it's yours. You can keep it.'

This is how Thomas finds himself spending the next few hours of the bright, early morning raking through rickles of rock in a nearby field. He carries a hammer, pointed on one end, square-headed on the other. His grandfather uses this tool to pick and root through tough clumps of dirt. Thomas, though, prefers the less meticulous method of scattering stones with a booted kick. He finds some satisfaction in sending them clattering across the red soil and keeps a mental count: *1 point for one foot, 2 for two feet, 3 for three*, and so on.

'Look here!' calls his grandfather at high noon. 'Tommy boy, look here!'

He's bent over the ground, his dust-covered, bespectacled face caught in the rapt fixation of a man who has struck gold. He lifts an ovular chunk of rock with a crust of wet, red soil. It is plain by all appearances, but his grandfather holds it with all the reverence of a holy relic. Yet Thomas cannot see its significance until they split it open in the back room at the rear of the

shop. The reticent rock reveals a world of ethereal reds and blue; at the core is a spectacular cosmos of mineral, undiscovered for millions and millions of years until this very moment. A thunderegg, his grandfather calls it: a spherical, agate-filled nodule.

'Magnificent, isn't it?' his grandfather says, and Thomas can only nod dumbly in response. No longer can he say, *it's just a rock. Just a stupid, dirty rock.*

"Magnificent" is his grandfather's word of choice. Thomas will hear it every day over the summer, when his grandfather inspects a uniquely patterned carnelian agate or a polished opal: *Magnificent!*, or dirt-covered quartz: *Magnificent!*.

Thomas remembers traces of this childish wonder in his mother, with that same accompanying spark when her eyes settled on something she admired. He asks himself how they find such significance in the most *insignificant* things. Asks himself, if he looks hard enough, could he see it, too?

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The built-up gases release in an eruption that rivals anything modern humanity has ever seen. It is a spectacular show for no one but the universe itself; it sits back in the dark theatre of space and watches with starry-eyed gaze. It asks, what will you do next?

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They go rock-hunting most days, hopping into the jeep and travelling into canyon-land, exploring lost rivers and ancient volcanic sites. His grandfather is a Looker, head perpetually facing downward, scanning. It is so fixed in its position that it may well have grown that way; the bent, bronze stalk of his grandfather's neck grows more familiar to Thomas than his face. He uncovers the landscape and sees potential in its form in a way that Thomas cannot comprehend. He picks up small chunks of dirt and grime and turns them into smooth iridescent stones, sculptures of crystal. He gathers dull river stones and tumbles them to glassy beads as bright as gems.

Thomas, too, occasionally unearths small treasures. He brings them to his grandfather for inspection, asking, 'What's this one?' 'This one?'

More often than not, the response is along the lines of: 'Yup. That's a leaveitright.'

'A leaveitright?'

'A leave it right there.'

They return to the house tracking red clay that clings to their shoes, their hands and faces begrimed in the blood of the earth. The rest of the day is spent in the back shop—a room covered in a fine film of mineral dust and strewn with pieces of uncut slabs, rough rock and petrified wood. Thomas loves this room best, loves the earthy must of cut rock and mineral oil; the stickiness of milky polish on his hands; the feel of grinding stone to glass-like smoothness. He learns how to use the rock cutter to slice slabs, the grinding and polishing wheels to refine rock and the tumbler to smooth river stones. He makes beads for his grandmother to string on a necklace and cabochons to set in a tie—merchandise for the shop, which she runs on the business side of things.

The machines become no more foreign to him than the very rocks he works. There is a satisfaction to sculpting rock, and for Thomas it's like meditating. *Cut. Grind. Polish.* He settles into familiar rhythms, forgetting himself, forgetting even the constant darkness pressing on his shoulders. *Cut. Grind. Polish.*

He never does find dinosaur bones, but one day he uncovers a curious looking specimen with his pick. At first, he dismisses it as a clump of hardened soil and returns it to the ground. But his grandfather, scrupulous as ever, retrieves the rejected rock from the soil and grins.

'Jasper,' he says, simply. There is a baffling weight to that word.

They take it back to the shop and Thomas works it through the processes. *Cut. Grind. Polish.* Like many of the shop's treasures, he finds that the jasper is not actually a rock, but a mineral chert, hiding under rock's guise.

When it's finished, Thomas can only furrow his eyebrows in bewildered disappointment. Hours of work and toil result in a dull brown stone interlaced with sinuous ribbons, prosaic as the desert. But his grandfather is proud beyond all words, chest wide like a puffed-up bird as he inspects the final product under the dim light of the shop.

'This particular variety is picture jasper. Do you know why they call it that?' he asks, and points. 'Look! Look at all the patterns. Like a miniature landscape. Do you see, Tommy? Magnificent. Just magnificent.'

And the longer Thomas gazes at the jasper pendant, the more entranced he becomes. He begins to see worlds of possibilities—endless landscapes in one smooth stone.

A few days later, while searching a dig site known for its quartz-rich sandstone, Thomas discovers rock. Not the gems and minerals his grandfather is so keen on, but the layers of Earth itself—sediment buried and reburied like a story folded between pages in a long, prehistoric book.

He begins to look for visible strata on their rock-hunting trips, and when he finds it, he spends hours studying it. He brings a journal to take notes. He observes. He sees. As he runs his hands across the chains of time, there is a murmurous voice in his ear. It tells him: *I have a story to tell. Listen. Listen.*

And listen he does.

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It begins as sludge, 100-million-year-old mud. The lava flows over the pit and quickly cools, cracking and creating cavities within. Gasses escape, leaving small pockets of space in which silica settles and hardens. In this metamorphosis, a mineral takes form.

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One hot, late night in July, he twists in bed and dreams of the quiet, inner life of rock. He dreams that he's traveling through sheets and sheets of strata, down to the very core of the Earth. He wonders: how many stories are waiting to be told, discovered? How many tectonic collisions, volcanic eruptions, catastrophic floods? How many meanings of our world can we find if we peel back each layer one by one?

Thomas wakes to the sound of wheels turning in slick oil. The world outside is still waking when he descends the stairs into the shop and creeps into the back room to find his grandfather at the polishing wheel. The late looming moon shining through the sole window has transformed the room, limning the mineral-dusted walls and counters with white radiance so that they glow fluorescently. His grandfather is a ghostly, backlight form, sitting so stilly at the wheel it is as if he were some ancient marble sculpture.

He is crying, the sounds muffled by the workings of the machines constantly whirring and stirring oil. But the tears glimmer as they slide down his face and his cheeks shine with their wetness.

As Thomas approaches, he wipes his eyes on the sleeve of his coat and lets out a small sigh. 'I miss her too, kiddo. Every second of every day.'

Thomas sets his hand on his grandfather's shoulder and takes the rough jasper from his hand. It is another cut from the slab he found—homely, beautifully brown. He rubs it patiently against deer hide and they sit in silence, smoothing away the ache of rock and sorrow. They bear the darkness together until it slips slowly, soundlessly away.

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Mud, ash and organic matter create the unique patterns which make this segment of jasper what it is—like nothing else in the living or non-living world. These forces fleck and divide, paint strokes of dark lines like strata across their canvas. They devise landscapes, vistas. The closest human word we might use to approximate the process of the world's creation is, perhaps, "Art".

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At summer's end, Thomas prepares to board the small plane. Something heavy stirs at the base of his stomach and knots in his throat, but some part of him knows he will return next summer—and the one after that.

'You'll spare your father some grief, I hope,' his grandfather says, eyebrow arched. 'He's climbing the same mountain as you, just at a different pace.'

Thomas nods. Before he steps up to board, his grandfather reaches out and presses something warm and hard into his palm: the jasper pendant.

'Keep it,' he says. 'It's your find, after all.' Then he clasps Thomas's hand with his own and leans forward to whisper, 'You are a magnificent boy, Tommy—don't you forget it. *Magnificent!*'

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Here is our Earth, 4.54 billion years in the making. For the rocks, no time has passed at all.

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