

PAUL HAMLYN

I have some stones from a beach in Suffolk. Huge amounts of time and the actions of the sea have rounded and smoothed them, made them. I'm not the only one with a stash of pebbles. Most of the people who wander up and down the beach pick up stones every now and then, examine them and take them home. They're exhibited in all the nearby houses; they are beguiling. I love their implacable substance and experienced surfaces. Some are in my pocket and more are in my studio where I use them as stand-ins for subject matter: asteroids, sometimes, or distant moons. After all, one bit of rock is much like another. I have one now in my hand. An old man, damaged and nearly dead, has grown a handsome white beard this month. He is hearing voices that say his time is up. His limbs and spine curve slowly inward, towards that foetal position familiar to us from Palaeolithic graves. To be round like the egg that gave rise to him is his aim. Then, out of nowhere, a shout calls wake up! It's OK! Live! Stones fall to Earth and clack into new places. Though each is unique, they all blend in, and whatever it was which, in the first place, drew you to this one or that is no longer apparent. Ages pass while, confused now, the old sack of bones scrapes a last fleck of strength and begins to uncurl. His head has moved back, an elbow juts out. His wide eyes try to see again. A cold bead of sweat runs across his forehead. His knee is creaking open a few degrees when the voice shouts again: 'Haha! No no, just kidding! as you were! You're fucked!' Perfectly still and half open now he stops, and moves on through time steady as a satellite across the endless sky. I throw my stone high as I can and turn away. A few seconds later I hear its landing clack behind me. My hand digs into my pocket for the rest and I can't help wishing gravity would relax a bit, do something different for once. Maybe God is gravity and things need to be round because He says so. I witnessed and survived a gargantuan asteroid impact that bounced everything not physically attached to the Earth off into space. Bang! Silence. Breathless, I'm trying to sing. Everything that was loose is up here with me, we're finding our orbits. All the water, the oceans, the seven seas, the mighty rivers and lakes, the puddles in potholes, the cold baths, the glasses half full are wobbling around in blobs, pre-globes attempting to coalesce. Finally the water pulls itself together to make an icy new moon with a fishy ocean centre. It circles the brown and parched earth and the hot wind blows my old man's dust. I'm looking at the stones from my pocket and fling them in an upward spray. They vanish in straight lines.