

KAREN ASHBURNER

A Beautiful Stripe of Red

IF YOU CAN find an old brick in your back yard, or a piece of slate, you can break it up with a hammer. You can throw it down on the cement driveway, duck down below the silver bumper of your mother's Dodge Omni, and smash it to pieces, bit-by-bit, sending fragments of slate into the neighbor's daisy garden, flinging bits of red brick into the corners of your eyes. When you are done you can put the pieces into an old glass mayonnaise jar and fill it with water, careful not to cut your hands with the sharp fragments you gather into a pile with the palm of your hand, careful not to let the gray and red dust seep into your bony lungs. You can screw the lid on tight and shake the jar with everything you've got. You and your friends can take turns shaking: ten, twenty, a hundred times each. You can open the lid from time to time, and see that the sharp edges of the brick and the slate have become smooth. This is what happens to rocks that are tossed about in the ocean: carrying and dumping, carrying and dumping, in rivers and streams and oceans all over the world, day after day, year after year, over and over again . . .

There is no relief; there is no stopping for cookies and playing jacks in the corner of the living room floor. There are only more rocks to break down, hard and glassy. There is only the ocean's waves crashing against the rocks, along the shore, breaking

them into pebbles, grinding them into sand and mud, carried by the rivers and streams, finally rushing down to broad valleys and open seas, banging and chipping each other as they go, finally settling on the ocean floor. Perhaps as you are shaking you can think about what might happen to your bits of slate and brick in a million years, when the trees in your backyard fall into swamps and are covered by mud, when glaciers move slowly through your little town, gouging out a U-shaped valley, broad and flat, its sides rising straight up, holding onto rocks deposited far from where they first formed. Maybe you can think about your own small body, lying in a bed of clay and settled to the bottom of the sea, covered and squeezed by layer upon layer, hardening under heat and pressure, crystallizing, buckling and folding until you are made-over into a beautiful stripe of red, pushing up into the high, high cliffs, now becoming yellow, now readily burning under the sun, now cracking and splitting into another thin, flat layer.