

CROCOITE

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A rock board, a rock pick and the philosopher's stone. In the presence of all that is absent, these are the objects with which this search begins.

It was always attracted to the 'ologies'. Geology, archaeology, mineralogy. She found these words in the museum and on the bookshelf, to be quite thrilling. For her eleventh birthday she asked for a geologist's pick so that she could go crystal hunting, fossicking, prospecting. She'd seen one in the local hardware store, under a thick glass-topped counter and knew that this was going to be the tool for her to navigate the world. She held the weighty gravity of it, felt its pull towards the earth's crust and registered instinctively the promise that it held. This was her opportunity to really know the world.

Her father had a rock collection himself, kept in a box that might have once held cigars or chocolate. Its wooden dividers carefully walling the world. She too wanted to fill that box with precious specimens, to sit each one on a small mattress of cotton wool, to fill its compartments with his pride in her discoveries and keep the absences at bay. With her rock pick she dug and pried, punctured, dragged and sifted the earth's crust through her fingers, felt its texture and grit. Chip chipping away at crystals on east coast granite, the rock pick ricocheting crazily off boulders, and jarring her wrists and hands. She spent her childhood sorting and classifying the world into her own muse-eology.

Mineral



When H saw the rock board in the local tip shop, she knew she had to have it.

IGNEOUS, SEDIMENTARY, FOSSILS, METAMORPHIC and MINERALS, its 52 specimens displayed in five taxonomic groups, each labelled with red DYMO tape. These were the labels of a carefully arranged mineralogical landscape, the force fields of its specimens tamed and framed. With two gold coins she purchases the rock board, brings home this trophy of small losses and lives with it. She could not have known the hand that had brought these samples, these fragments, together but like so many others circulating the globe, this dispersed collection carries with it the zeal of a geological education – a portable landscape of Tasmania's idiosyncratic terrain.

Even with 40 of its 52 specimens missing, there is something irresistible in what it leaves behind. The board resonates with promise and loss. Its rocks knocked off and scattered in the moves between classroom, office and tip face. The best bits, the fossils and petrified wood, the silver and crystal bone, already gone. Picked and pocketed by other scavengers, H sets about filling these absences, to recover what is lost.



Under the label MINERALS there are spaces for three specimens of crocoite, two are missing, leaving in their place, rock shaped ruptures of perishing particle board. One specimen of 'crocoite' remains intact, a smooth reddish solid glassy lump. With a glance she knows this specimen to be a fake, a substitute for crocoite's

much rarer, crystalline shards of 'red lead', the finest examples of which are said to be found in the West Coast of Tasmania.

Group – Chromates

Composition – $PbCrO_4$

Hardness – 2.5 - 3

Specific Gravity – 6.0

Cleavage – Distinct prismatic

Fracture – Conchoidal to uneven



Sitting silently in a large glass case, in the inner sanctum of the Zeehan School of Mines and Metallurgy, there's a spectacular specimen, thought perhaps to be the best in the world. She's astounded by this exceptionally large mineral mass, its brittle red spines thrusting outwards,

but it's the accompanying text that grips her. It reads: 'around 1895 James (Philosopher) Smith and W.R. Bell make the first Tasmanian discovery of crocoite at Heazlewood, near Savage River'. A splinter of red lead recognition. A single sentence that joins her family name Heazlewood, the mineral crocoite and the legendary prospector Philosopher Smith.



Crocoite. Lead chromate. Red lead. Crocosite. Here, Tasmania's mineral emblem grafts its identity to the roots of her family tree. Consulting her mineralogical catalogues, none of them do it justice. She reads about its hardness, specific gravity and cleavage and how to test it in a flame. This exquisite mineral was once found in such quantities in the surrounding hills that it

was used as flux in the smelters of Zeehan. She notes the colour of its streak, its vitreous to adamantine lustre, its massive habit and the way its slender prismatic crystals form slowly underground.

H pauses at the thick glass cabinet for a long time, re-reads the label and then looks again at the crystalline mass. She has to find a way underground.



It's he who finds her in the pub, a miner, writer, thinker and artist who speaks the language of meta-physics. He is lanky with a long moustache like a prospector from the museum's old photographs. His workroom is part office, part library. Ground up minerals from the earth's

crust sit in crucibles, meticulously catalogued and sorted into a dazzling mineralogical palette. In the middle, he sits in a chair surrounded by core samples, maps and reference books. On his desk sits a manuscript. He has a story to tell.

The outdoors is his studio. In the rain his artworks sit, forged from monumental events and the daily moments of a miner's life. His knowledge accrues like the geological record, spanning time, material and space. Every single fragment is accounted for, catalogued with a story. She asks him about crocoite, and he shows her an entry in his 1910 copy of W.F. Petterd's Catalogue of the Minerals of Tasmania. A hundred years since its publication and there is still no greater authority. As they leave his studio he gives her a small specimen of crocoite which she pockets immediately. Tomorrow he will take her to a seam of red lead underground.

She is ready.



H joins the others where the bush road meets a sign pointing to 'High Street'. The track carves its way up through the bush, the scent of tea tree rising from the hills of Dundas, a township long since retaken by the bush. Small traces of a settlement, a miner's hut and a residence surrounded by lilac studded boulders, green Stichtite serpentine mined from beneath her feet sit steady in the rain.

Following the miner's truck up ahead, the track winds further and higher through the bush. Fully charged with adrenaline and only just able to focus on navigating the few visible feet ahead of her through the rain, H is convinced she could never find this place again. Leaving the vehicle they walk on to reach the adit, the mine's

horizontal entry. They pause to don assorted layers of protection, fluoro coats, hard hats, a life jacket and a bicycle helmet. Decked out in miner's clothing, embroidered with company logos and other people's names, they are emboldened as they assume the identities of their hosts and each silently accepts there is no turning back now. Bravado has yet to kick in. They pose for photos at the mine's entry, chatter nervously, test batteries on dimming lights. They enter the mine, walking into the underground in single file, enclosed in a hand carved tunnel of warm air.



Out of the steadily dripping rainforest, the miners praise the comfort of the underground, and H can feel that too. It's a slow procession of excitement and fear. Ahead and behind, the

steady, kind voices quell her rising anxiety as the light on her borrowed hard hat is already fading. In the dark she keeps close to the warm voices ahead and the banter of encouragement from her guides as they calmly lead the party on. H can tell they want to share their underworld, and she knows she has to rise to this occasion.

Up front, the procession's lights disappear and turn a corner, and momentarily the darkness engulfs her while her sense of smell and sound loom larger. H sees small bobbing facets of the tunnel wall appear again ahead, as the lanterns nod and illuminate white pendulous sacs hanging from the stopes of the mine. As she turns another corner and the miners' contagious excitement overtakes her sense of claustrophobic panic. Keep breathing. Keep focused.

'Take your torch and head up there, you will see something amazing,' they say.
And they are right.

A small cleft overhead, encrusted with red and orange crystalline spines, glimmers in the weakening head-lamp light. To H it's a scene from her childhood stories, of caves studded with jewels, lamp genies and Arabian nights. She is mesmerized by this seam of chromium oxide,