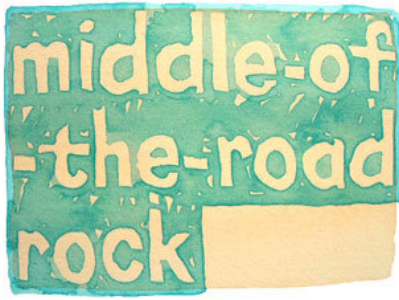


Story for performance #911
webcast from Sydney at 08:03PM, 18 Dec 07



Source: 'Iran's first big gig since devil took West's best tunes', *Guardian News and Media* in *Sydney Morning Herald* online, 18/12/07.

Tags: Italy, countryside, death, mythology

Writer/s: Sara Jane Bailes

© 2008 Barbara Campbell and the writer/s

About a quarter of a mile west of those water towers you see before us, heading out of the township of Vincent de Goudge on the Chariton Randolph Highway, as the road begins its ascent rising up to form a ridge like a whipped up stallion, there stands a dirty old rock. People from the vicinity call it Middle-of-the-Road Rock. And what a darksome shadowy thing it is: from nowhere it springs out at you, and there's no sense in believing that they built the road with that great heap of granite stood in the middle like that. No, no. That rock came and put itself down here. There's many a folk say it came after they built the road, that one day they woke up and there it was, like it had always been there, like we was moving backwards through time. Nobody knows where it came from. That rock possesses more of a human animal kind of disposition, as if it had a life, as if it were a moving watching elemental creature that knows time and hunger and hatred and can decide upon things.

Now you know as well as I do as to how folk can quickly talk up a haunting and such, and I know about tales and the tittle-tattle bred by a small-town mind so bored it can't find enough experience to play in, and the whittling up of some nonsense as folks will scramble after to keep a community held together and such, to make us all of an opinion about something that makes us believe we belong so that we won't want to leave. Such telling keeps folks close. But see here: nobody dares even talk about that rock, like if we did it might come to know about it, like if you said some of the things you were really thinking it might bring a curse down upon the place, just like Moberly, Missouri, the town that lost all the water there ever was beneath it after the fatal betrayal of Emerson Piker and his two younger sisters, Elvira and Margaret. No, see, that rock possesses some terrible almighty power, makes you feel awful just to see it. Then there's the sound as some say they hear coming from it at night, a grinding cruel sound as scares hunting men out of their skin.

One moonlit night in early June two years ago, when the waters were still cool and stickleback minnows could be seen larking and glistening with merriment, and all day long the little ones had been down at the water fishing and tiddling about, Laura Carter walked out of her house down past the stream with her thick dark hair hanging down her back, long and straggled, like she was losing her senses. With bare feet she walked out along the highway towards Middle-of-the-Road Rock, and there they found her later that night.

Usually, Laura's hair was so perfect it was like something manufactured. We'd say it reminded us of the place her family had come from, full of deep tradition and secrets.

Her mother had arrived from Gioia Tauro, a small port town on the south west coast of Calabria in Southern Italy. A poor wretched place it was, from where many left and migrated west across the ocean to build a better life. Now, see, that place where she came from is where Ulysses once nearly crashed his boat against the rock of Scylla, a promontory that juts out into the sea just above the Messina Straits. Tied to the mast of his ship, Ulysses was lured by Scylla as he attempted to voyage along the treacherous coastline of the Mediterranean, steering the least harmful route his ship could follow.

Jealous of Poseidon's love for the beautiful Scylla, Amphitrite, wife of Poseidon, turned Scylla into a hideous dog-like sea monster who they called The Render. She had six heads and twelve feet, and each head carried three rows of close-set tiny sharp teeth. Her cry was a muted yelping, and she seized sailors and cracked their bones between her tiny teeth before slowly swallowing them. It is her rock that projects out from the Calabrian coast near the village of Scylla, named after Scylla, which sits opposite Cape Peloro on the island of Sicily.

Laura Carter always wore her hair tight and coiled to perfection, pinned, oiled and twisted with a hint of citrus, all conspired to keep it firmly in place. That hair was no looser midway through the afternoon, when all about the town men's laces and collars and neckties and ladies' bonnets had begun to relax; when clothes yawned and gave way to the heat of the day. Laura's intricate coil remained no less strictly bound than at dawn when you imagined her taming those thick black strands together with thin fingers, running her hands through and scraping stray wisps from that high brow of hers. She was one for being a bit of her own kind, if you know what I mean, as if chatter was going on inside of her all of the time. Sometimes you could hear from a distance as she played the piano in the front room when she thought no one was listening, and she would play such tunes as you couldn't imagine hearing, like all the notes were invented, made up, thrown together in a way that didn't make any kind of musical sense. It was the sound of a lamenting soul.

That night, when they found Laura at the foot of the rock, her fingers had been chewed down to the knuckles, the white of her bone glistening in the moonlight. Her hair was tightly bound around her neck, this way and that, strangling her, and you could no longer tell where it begun or ended. By her side lay handfuls of tiny sharp teeth, scattered about her body like abandoned pearls from the bottom of the deep blue sea.

Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Sara Jane Bailes.