

## Gravel

If you look at gravel and see only dull stones that won't stay in the path you've made for them; if you lament how they pop from shoe soles like tiddlywinks to flip onto lawn and flowerbed or skip into the road to be stolen by tyres, you're not looking close enough. Squat down like a child, sift, shift, sort. You'll find flint, the first blade, that could cut flesh from caribou; pea pebbles worn smooth by the slow brown wash of millennia. Here's a belemnite, prehistoric calamari fossilised on a bed of silt; there a gastrolith, the Gaviscon of dinosaurs; there gryphea, the devil's toenail; here ammonite, worm cast, fossil branch of coral. See the slate grey stone with white equator? Close your eyes, caress the white vein with your finger, make a wish. Give the stone to the first person you see for your wish to be granted.

Tony Wass taught me to play five-stones with gravel, how to choose the exact size of pebble for my hands, how to throw the jack stone, snatch up one, two, three stones while the jack was in the air, make a clean catch. I played until my knuckles were skinless; spent hours searching for stones with holes through them, ginnels to another world; my mother said a witch put the holes there to entice Satan over for a brew. I wondered at the spindle drill of history's slow drip grinding through stone. I collected one hundred and forty three, found in the long path up to our house, kept them in a secret shoe box till my father found it, thought them tat, threw them back to the path. I began the search again. I found one on the school sports field once, showed it to Mr Halton, who was unimpressed, said *must have been struck by a javelin*, turned back to oiling his bat.