

# SISYPHUS

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The gods had condemned Sisyphus to ceaselessly rolling a rock to the top of a mountain, whence the stone would fall back of its own weight.<sup>1</sup>

I visualise the scene: Sisyphus, the stone and the mountain. The human body and the piece of rock in contact and in motion. I imagine how the three interconnected elements leave their trace on one another. The animate, supple body; the static, heavy form of the rock; the open landscape. The judgment for the work he has to do has been handed down: Sisyphus must roll the stone up the mountain, again and again, and it will roll down, again and again. His punishment is to continue this infinite cycle for the rest of his life. His sentence is seemingly a repetition of the same trivial repetitive action, but the scenario will, nevertheless, change over time. Sisyphus will grow older, the stone will become rounder, and the impression in the landscape will become deeper.

The stone awaits him. He bends his muscular body and grabs the stone with his big hands. I look at the surface of the hand; the skin is stretched and becomes bluish around the muscles in all of the joints around the blood vessels and tendons, which rise in a relief pattern. Against the grey and rough surface of the stone, his hands are smooth. The stone is compact where it lies heavily on the loose earth. How did it get its shape? Where did it come from? I look around. It is

lying on an arid field; it must have been moved. It may have been stuck in a swirling current in a nearby river, rounded by circular motions against neighbouring stones, or brought thousands of kilometres across land by a glacier. A hundred years, a thousand years, millions. Once it was a part of something bigger, now it has become an entity unto itself, cut off and rounded at the edges. Sisyphus gathers his strength and pushes the stone into motion. Behind him an impression has been left: his own footprints in a compressed furrow in the compacted earth.

I look at his footprint. The details are difficult to discern, and if I had another imprint to compare with, I could say a bit more about the degree of power and speed. The area of the compressed soil and the width of the furrow depend on the size and weight of the stone. Had the stone been round like a marble and rolled straight ahead, the marking would have been a smooth, flat strip that continued in the same thickness as far as the stone had rolled. But this stone was not spherical; thus, the impression made in the earth was not a straight line, but a waveform, an uneven curve: wide in some places and narrow in others.

But, the picture won't completely fall into place until I decide which type of soil the stone is lying on and the footprints are in. In nature, earth is rarely found as a uniform mass. I simplify the place where Sisyphus must roll the stone. Now Sisyphus is standing on a ploughed field; the soil is moist. He bends down and pushes the stone. First the earth is compressed by the stone, then his footprint can be seen in the compacted track the stone has made. A network of cracks forms around the footprints. But what if the earth

was something else – richer in sand? Or, if below the surface it was full of hard lumps? Or if it wasn't soil at all, but loose gravel? How will these masses arrange themselves when they are subjected to the pressure of the rock being rolled in motion? And how is the process affected by weather conditions and the season? Is it in the middle of a hot summer, where the earth has been dried out by the sun? Or is it in winter where the overlaying crusts are frozen in hard lumps? Or has the rain made the earth swampy and muddy?

There are so many details that need to be mapped. I have to make a reconstruction for the details to be credible. I must get away from the desk and out onto the ploughed field, where I should grab a heavy stone, feel the weight of it and sink into the soft earth myself, to see, and thereafter, describe what actually happened.

I imagine a parody of a crime series where the investigator is standing in front of a blackboard with arrows on it. The arrows point in all directions from person to person, to places and locations at specified times. They propose logical and less logical theories that can tie everything together and account for what happened as the pieces of the puzzle begin to fall into place. Alas, memory makes liars of us all.

Sisyphus has left the ploughed field and is now on a slope some way up the mountain. It is raining and the water that is hitting the smooth mountain side is flowing towards him. It gathers in small rivulets. Because of the steep incline of the mountain, the speed of the water flow is increased. Pebbles are dislodged and tumble towards him before they are halted by obstructions formed by small plants, torn

branches, soil, and larger, immovable stones. If the amount of water increases, everything will be pressed down towards a new resting point.

Sisyphus stands still. The amount of water has become a new obstacle he must deal with. He moves on with the stone in front of him towards the top of the mountain.

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<sup>1</sup> Camus, Albert (1953). *Myten om Sisyfos* [*The Myth of Sisyphus*]. Oslo: J. W. Cappelens Forlag p.92.

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