

VERTEBRAE

We met in the backmost section of the library. You were wearing the type of sunglasses that, at the time, seemed cool. I had on my sandals with the thin, white ankle strap, and you smelled of cured leather and sweat, metallic. We were both in the children's section, looking at the picture books with the thick card-stock pages that still held creases from years back.

"Hey," you said. "You ever known a dinosaur to look like that?"

When addressed, I didn't smile or look up or laugh. Your skin was the color of unsalted butter and your nails, sharp, where they grazed my wrist.

"No." You closed the book on a page of uncharted bones. "I don't suppose you have."

Each day, you picked me up from the city bus stop. I waited as the lines went by: blue and yellow and red, all the primary colors a kaleidoscope of shifting lenses inside my head. The engines wheezed diesel, black, and you showed up only after the acrid fog of worn-out transit had amassed.

In your apartment, you stripped me down, and we both sat in the bath. You liked how thick the city-grit collected on certain parts of my skin: in the inner crease of an elbow, in between fingers, and in the hollow pleats between my ribs. You washed the dirt from me slowly, each stroke of your brush deliberate, and you kept me there until the bath grew cold, the water stagnant.

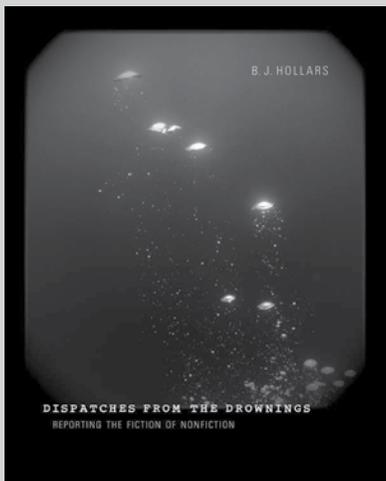
"Did you know that your bones stick out just so?" you would say, and, with the most precise of lines, you would run a finger down each of my thirty-three vertebrae.

I would sit with my chin to my chest, my arms wrapped around my knees to help with the shivering, and you would trace and retrace as if there was something there worth memorizing.

In your study, you kept a cardboard box of old children's books. I would look through them as you slept: fairy tales and pop-ups and adventure stories with tea-colored maps. The bindings were fresh, some uncracked, perfectly intact, and if, perhaps, I thought you'd had a child once, I didn't ask.

On your desk, the airplane-glued model of a dinosaur skeleton stood perched atop a paper mess. Some nights, I imagined taking that frame apart, carefully dissolving each jointed bond, indenting the pieces one by one into my flesh before scattering them. How you would cradle the fragile bones then, a shifting mass inside your hands, and, though you'd try, desperate, you'd never get the form quite right again.

Your touch was cold, each stroke a precise, scientific excavation. Always, you pressed your fingers into my spine, searching for some message beneath the skin that could not be defined. If bruises came later, I didn't know how to mind. Your hands were so much stronger than mine.



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When the carnival came to town, you bought me kettle corn and led me by the hand. Our fingers grew sticky with the salt-sugar-sweat, and, as the lights of the Ferris wheel blinked on, you only tightened your grip.

You won prizes in all of the games of merit. Much later, when the fabric seams came undone and the dirt began to collect, I would squeeze out the hard pellet stuffing and wonder if it had all been a trick. A twenty at the booth got us into the hall of mirrors

Only once did you take me to the city museum. You knew the layout of all of the galleries, could recite, word for word, the placards of each exhibit. In the lobby, you bought the tickets, and, beside you, I disappeared into the space of your silhouette.

The hall of mammals was crowded with the forms of the dead. The pelts had been coated in arsenic, a deterrent to deterioration, but still I could see where the skins had begun to stretch, their seams unkempt. I found you at the end, near the upright human skeleton.

“YOU DON’T CRY MUCH, DO YOU?” YOU WOULD ASK, AND I’D TELL YOU NO BEFORE I COULD EVEN THINK TO ANSWER YES.

unchecked, and you took me as far into the maze as we could go in.

The glass mirrors grew clouded with our breath. You unbuttoned my blouse and pushed your thumb hard, hard, hard into my neck.

You said, “You don’t even know what you look like, I bet. Go on. Take a look at it.”

The bruises on my back had waned from a deep blue to red. Inside them, my spine showed as a wavering line of sharp peaks and dips.

“Just like that picture I showed you.” You kissed the knob at the top of my neck as you pressed me into the glass. “A stegosaurus.”

You liked using candles whenever storms blew in. Sometimes, the wind would come up and the bulbs would dim, but other days, we both knew, it was all just pretend. You lit tea lights and tapers and laid me face down on the bed. In the glow, you studied the length of my spine and counted the shadows.

With the lights off and the windows open, you’d sing. You’d hum a children’s song as if there was someone there to make calm, and you’d press a hand, firm, between my shoulder blades as you poured the wax. You’d blow soft until the skin was no longer red, and then you’d peel off the cast and melt it back down before starting all over again.

“You don’t cry much, do you?” you would ask, and I’d tell you no before I could even think to answer yes.

Her bones had been bleached, stripped of all muscles and tendons, and you called me to your side as though I were your own.

“You know, you’re just like her,” you said. “A mere difference of flesh.”

I looked to her then, to the small shoulders, the rib cage and wrists, the spooned out pelvis. Beneath my skin, my bones bent. My joints, as they were, came apart and reknit, and everywhere the breaking came soft and silent.

You left me in the afternoon at the bus stop. The metal base of the seat was hot, and I watched you over the pop-up book that you’d brought, the pages spread open on your lap. It was one of the better-worn books in your collection, one that had been buried so deep beneath the others in the cardboard box that, for a long time, perhaps, it had seemed lost.

“There,” you said when you found the page you were seeking. “That’s you, isn’t it?”

The scene was one of death: the attack of an upright dinosaur on the low, stooped form of a stegosaurus. Along her spine, the female’s sharp, bony plates had taken the brunt of her predator’s attack, endured, as they should, to protect. In time, she would tire and, broken, fall. The pity, then, would not be in her death but in what little of the story was left: in what could be garnered from the ossified bones and the dirt-logged skin, from the puzzle, long interred, of scattered remnants.

Through my shirt, the bench burned each protruding knob of my spine red.

“Yes,” I said. “I suppose it is.” ❧