

Proudly, Unburied

by Evelyn Coffin

I have always been in love with bones. Or at least, from an early age, further back than my own geologic time scale goes. I suppose my awareness of the cause of bones came about in the usual way. Little kids, their cat gets hit by a car, or their grandma drops dead, or something else happens which acquaints them with death, and I imagine a new lobe developing in their brains, a new region to label: parietal, occipital, cerebellum, mortem. Mine came with dinosaurs, in a true spirit of unoriginality. I carried around a plastic Apatosaurus for several years in grade school, a very unnatural-looking green and orange fellow with a nonetheless cheerful face and soothing folds of little wrinkles on his round belly. I would run the tip of his seamed tail around the curves of my lips and teeth and think about his potential relatives, encased in rock, maybe literally frozen, buried under tons of patient soil, waiting to be half-dug out for the cross-section views in picture books.

I pondered my own death-position. If it were to be in a tar pit, I would curl up very small, and go in cannonball style, so that my skeleton was a messy snarl. Aboveground, waiting for the millennia to cover me, and I would stretch my body out away from itself and reach, my bones pointing the way against a wall of earth toward something that wasn't there. Later I read some books about Pompeii and thought with horror about being caught, unready, a tremor of the coast my only warning. I knew that I wanted to look peaceful, an effigy, and above all as though I had been prepared. On the last day of school I accidentally left my Apatosaurus on the coat hooks in the hallway. But I kept his dead relatives with me, in my head.

My older sister Isabelle was the one who lived outside her head. She carried whatever dinosaurs she had proudly, unburied, with her confident childhood swagger and sweet, decisive manner. Once she learned to undo the little hook on the outside of her bedroom door she would sneak downstairs at naptime and liberate me, her adoring younger sister, from where I waited for her in my sleepy-time enclosure in the living room. Scooting quietly along the cream carpet we would be in and out of the brown sugar bin in the kitchen and back in our respective prisons before our mother—perfect suburbanite mother, who had the cream carpet cleaned every week and drank gin during our naptimes—could emerge suspiciously and unsteadily from her office in the basement. When we were caught, which was seldom, I took the heat for Isabelle, every time. I must have considered it a small price to pay for the way she stood tiptoe on the cold bathroom stool to undo my lock, reverently sliding the little catch up and over and down while I eyed her exposed white stomach through the keyhole as she reached and reached for me. In most of my memories of her, she is in action, I watching, drawn to her dance but unsure of my own steps, and in the family photographs—shiny, sharp-cornered boxes of them, skeletons of dead time labeled with my mother's cursive—she is a blur of motion, a too-slow shutter speed, and I in the foreground or background am always perfectly exposed, still, eyes wide. Everyone called her "Is," and it suited her, forever an affirmation, a declaration. She, Is.

I remember the backyard of our little gray house on Brighton Road was an excellent place for bare feet. My mother's hosta perched in their dark-mulched shade garden and took up a rock-bordered strip to the side, gracefully disguising the inside-city-limits-illegal hamster and goldfish burial ground. (And only once was anyone's grave disturbed. I dug at night until I hit the softly crumbling cardboard shoebox and lifted it out, solemn and tremblingly. Gloria the hamster's tiny delicate spine was white against the dark rich soil and it curled gently inside my consciousness, like a v of geese against a gray sky or a coffee stain spreading its curve on absorbent white paper. I felt no remorse as I reburied her and added her bones to my Apatosaurus's relatives'.) Tiny wild strawberries bloomed and bore fruit along the back-leaning picket fence, their seedy bright red invitation proving irresistible every year despite their awful, green-bitter taste that we pretended to enjoy on plastic saucers, with plastic cups of hose water. The back middle of the yard was dominated by a green metal swing set and slide, and the furthest back corner housed a forsythia bush which never bloomed, not once, but whose defective branches formed a sort of willowy cage, which I liked to lean into and carve away at with a fingernail, revealing slices of crisp green.

One afternoon—I couldn't have been more than five or six—Is and I were playing there in the backyard, the late afternoon sunlight that of a thousand years previous and a thousand years distant. Prehistoric dust motes floated around us and futuristic insects droned lazily through the still air, all turned liquid-bright by the sun's descent. We were playing with bubbles, shrieking as we set the ridged plastic wands into shallow neon dishes and holding our breaths, withdrawing sticky fingers and greasy-slick rainbows of bubbles which then hung, fluorescent and alight, until popping and raining down amidst our shouts with brief gold showers. It was Isabelle's idea that we pop the bubbles with rocks, and it must have been she who guided my pudgy fingers around the gray slate, nice and cool, hefted from under the lattice of the porch.

"Watch," she commanded, "and wait 'til I tell you," and she puffed her flushed cheeks out and pursed her lips, shining with previous bubbles and spit, and produced a plethora of small bubbles.

"Now!" she squealed, and immediately dropped to the ground.

I read somewhere that every one of your memories is only a memory of the last time you remembered it, and that each time you pull it off the shelf it is altered, ruined; I don't know if this is the case but I have taken out this image of her and thumbed it so many times that if it were a Polaroid its chemicals would have dissolved into the skin of my hands long ago, as perhaps its truth has. She'd pulled her legs up in a frog's crouch and covered her swinging blond head with both hands as she gazed up at me, chin nearly on ground, that late afternoon sun illuminating every blond hair on her skinny legs and arms, expectant and excited as I heaved the slate toward the bubbles that lingered above her in the air. Her hands were not enough to protect her and the rock landed solidly, a dull impact right at the part in her hair.

Moments later, perching on the arm of the blue everyday sofa and gazing transfixed at a sliver of her skull around my mother's panicky administrations of a nubbly blue wash cloth, I touched her shoulder consolingly as she cried, over and over,

"I didn't get to throw my rock! I didn't get to throw my rock!"

That evening I went outside and found the rock and inspected it and sure enough, there was a piece of my sister still on one of its dull edges, a chalky dark red smudge of her that wouldn't come off when I rubbed at it with my thumb. I buried it in the garden near the hamster graves. I don't know why I did but I knew—or maybe I was just hiding my guilt, destroying the evidence—that I couldn't just toss that piece of my sister back with a clatter to the other rocks.

I liked to imagine that the hosta near that spot grew extra that year.

We shared a lot of things growing up, besides vastly different memories of the rock story. A bedroom. Our mutual resentment of our little brother, Benjamin, whom we thought quite spoiled. Our first rose-blood periods, within months of each other's despite the two-year age gap. Dirty magazines. Clothes. Her first boyfriend, in a way, but a way which I never told her about.

When she introduced me to him I immediately wanted to excavate his collarbones from the muted earth of his shirt.

"He kissed me—right on the lips—right in homeroom—!" She hugged her smooth knees and swung her hair around to her back as she told me how he had held her in his arms cross-legged on his bed and kissed her other places and she left me behind in the world of wild strawberries and pink bedspreads. I imagined his knees in my ribs, the hard bones of his wrists insistent under my scapulae. Our hipbones collided in my thoughts and his spine at the top of his neck was sharp behind my mind long after she stopped seeing him.

The summer before she left for college when she told me she was pregnant I pictured Gloria's hamster skeleton, budding in the soft hang of her stomach between her hipbones.

"It was positive. I did it twice. Oh God—" She began to cry, rocking barefoot on the bed, cheeks blotchy and shining with snot and tears.

"Now I can't—can't go to school—or do anything—ever—" I watched her shoulder blades appear and disappear, smooth twin oil pumps drawing the wracking sobs from deep within her.

"Oh. Oh. Is." I touched her angular shoulder and as I wrapped my arms around her hard and perched my chin where her stitches had been under her hair I could almost hear her wailing,

"I didn't get to throw my rock! I didn't get to throw my rock!" My hands were once again not enough to protect her—not from our mother, should she find out, or from who might stare at her in the hallways at school, or from the weight like a sharp piece of slate of what she might never become.

We shared a lot of things growing up but we don't talk much about the silent night that we boiled a size 12 crochet hook—nine millimeters, best for lacework—in a pot on the back of the stove, her cellphone glowing its lurid instructions on the countertop, and I slid the hook still hot between her legs. It's a miracle we didn't kill her but I can still feel the tremors along the coast of her body, the hesitation and then the yield to the persistent digging of the hook inside her as she lay on the linoleum of the kitchen, stretched out, a beautiful terrified 17-year-old effigy whose lips were shining with fear. Nearly two days later when she began to bleed I took care of her until her legs had stopped their agitated thrashing and her mouth was pursed in sleep and then, because I did not know what else to do, I bundled away her sheets and took the tiny bloody-white handful of my sister out of the house in an old washcloth. It was very late, and the

grass was cool under my bare feet, the night not truly dark and angularly illuminated by the street lamps out front. The night insects clicked and crawled as I plunged my white hands into the dark mulch of the hosta garden. There were no bones, no tiny perfect skeleton, but I buried it deep next to Gloria and the rock and added its form to the earthy cutaway in my head, ranked in order of importance and era: Apatosaurus, hamster, sister, colliding hips, ribs, sister.

The hosta thrived that year.

I wonder sometimes whether childhood is really a microcosm of adulthood, whether I am actually the same girl who threw that rock and whether Is is the same girl who crouched on the ground, watching it come toward her, hands on her head. Is went to college that fall and I finished high school and wound up at a little Midwestern university a few hours away from her. We talk, but not too much. I joined the garden club. They tell me I have a green thumb. We planted hyacinth bulbs in the beds along the residence buildings this past fall, dry and flaking and rough on my hands, and now, early April, they're coming up already. I too traded early strawberries and pink bedspreads for the collision of hips and the unearthing of collarbones, and I've decided that I was not that girl but the rock, pre-Cambrian, ages old; or the sunlight which also shone on the head of my Apatosaurus; or the imperceptible pull of the earth against them all; because it cannot be that my own solitary era is so fleeting. Earlier this afternoon I took a test—twice—but there are no tremors on my coast. This time I know what I'm doing. I'm on my knees in a patch of soft warm earth, pushing aside the dead leaves that molded themselves to the ground and revealing small, luminous green stalks. I rank them as I go, in order of era and importance: this one will bloom for an Apatosaurus, this one for a hamster, one for Is, for hips and ribs and Is again and now one for me, and one for the little skeleton budding inside me, and all reaching proudly, unburied.