Skeletal Thoughts

Signs of Life (2012), 6

The leg bone's connected to the knee bone,
The knee bone's connected to the thigh bone,
The thigh bone's connected to the hip bone,
Now shake dem skeleton bones! (Folk Song)

The human skeleton is comprised of 206 bones. The largest, the femur or thigh bone, allows us to walk, run, leap, kick, jump, and dance. The smallest, the stapes, allows us to hear. Three years ago, for the first time, I broke one of my bones—the greater tuberosity of the humerus—when I fell smack on my shoulder on an intermediate run at Alta Ski Resort. With my humerus disabled, I could not open a door with my right arm. Or turn the steering wheel of my car. Or lift a hair dryer, toothbrush, or fork. My fracture has fully healed and my range of motion is back one hundred per cent. I've since skied Alta, albeit fearfully, with no misfortune. But now, I realize I'm breakable.

In Puntarenas, Costa Rica, at the Villa Caletas Hotel, four animal skeletons are displayed in glass cases: two pumas, an iguana, and a fer-de-lance. One of the pumas stands poised to attack, his jaws open in a snarl, perhaps as he'd like to be remembered. His bones were "articulated"—cleaned of flesh, degreased, bleached, and reassembled into an anatomically correct posture.

The articulated snake was even more intriguing. Its remains were coiled over two feet high, a structural wonder. I don't know if the venomous viper was baring its fangs or minding his own business when his life ended. Had I encountered him in the flesh, I would have been chilled to the bone. But dead, and no longer deadly, the fer-de-lance was mysterious, dramatic, and beautiful.

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During a sailing trip to the Dodecanese Islands of Greece, our boat docked at a tavern on a tiny island for dinner—was it Arki? Near our table, on a dividing wall, I noticed a ram's skull with a green plant inside, most likely the head of one of the island's sheep. I coveted the skull, its curled horns, its even teeth. Since I spoke no Greek, the captain of our boat negotiated with the proprietor and I acquired my treasure for just twelve dollars. To protect the skull on our flight back to Seattle, I wrapped it in beach towels and underwear and plastic bags. At the Frankfurt Airport security checkpoint, I placed my package on the conveyor belt. As it passed under the x-ray machine, the security agent regarded me with suspicion. "Was ist das?" he asked. "Ein Kopf," I said. A head. I was ordered to unwrap it.

When concentration camps in Germany and Poland were liberated in 1945, soldiers found piles and piles of bones, the indisputable evidence of a holocaust that murdered six million. In April, 2011, Iraqi authorities discovered a mass grave containing the remains of more than 800 men, women, and children believed to have been slaughtered during the reign of Saddam Hussein. Hundreds of such graves pock the country. The bones don't lie.

My father suffered from Multiple Myeloma, an incurable cancer of the bone marrow. Dad died nineteen months after he was diagnosed. We're far more likely to get Osteoporosis or Arthritis, bone diseases less dangerous but still debilitating. These unwelcome companions of age destroy our agility, our flexibility, our mobility, the very architecture of our bodies.

In Rome, the Santa Maria della Concezione dei Cappuccini church is famous as an ossuary, a final resting place of skeletal remains. Here, the bones of over 4,000 Capuchin friars collected from years 1528 to 1870 are on display, fashioned into curious Baroque and Rococo style arrangements—death as art.

Human skeletons repel me, especially skulls: the bald pate, the loose jaw, the cavernous eye sockets, the ghastly, frozen grin. Why am I creeped out by the bones of my own species? Perhaps my distaste was triggered when, at the impressionable age of four, I was frightened by a bright, white skeleton on a classmate's black Halloween costume at Mrs. Barrett's Pre-School. Boo! Or maybe I'm queasy about human remains because I watch as they're dug up or

discovered almost weekly on “Law and Order” and “CSI,” evidence of abuse, neglect, tragedy, a dreadful accident, a vengeful act, a serial killing. Most likely, I find skeletons unsettling because they remind me I’m mortal. One day my body will be buried in a grave and decompose or I will be cremated and my bones charred to ashes. When I told my mom I preferred cremation, she informed me that Jews don’t cremate, because our relatives were incinerated at Auschwitz and Buchenwald and Treblinka. I told her the Nazis didn’t get to co-opt my end-of-life choice. Screw them. I may yet change my mind. But so far, I want my ashes scattered on Lake Sammamish. Or buried under a cherry blossom tree. Or, perhaps, tossed in the wind at the top of a powdery ski run at Alta.

Fade to black.