

Blindfold Wonder

*In the mammal skeleton collections of the Museum für
Naturkunde Berlin*

I suppose that if Dr. Morton had met me,
he would have fantasized about my skull
assuming its place among the shelves
of his collection, yet here, among these
wood-and-glass cabinets safeguarding walrus
tusks, zebra skull grins, and platypus bills,
I would like to think that with the dead
I have found my place. In the ossuary quiet,
the braying, roaring, bellowing long silenced,
though I train my eyes on an aardvark's humerus
as my calipers' blades capture its length,
the brown skin of my fingers nonetheless glares
against the bone's cortical whiteness.

After entering its length into a spreadsheet, I return
the humerus to its skeleton's cardboard box,
next fishing out a femur—As I glide the calipers
along its shaft, I try again to rebind my eyes
with the blindfold wonder now threadbare
since the days it swaddled my childhood gaze:

I remember when I was four years old, the yellow
of taxis on the George Washington Bridge,
the white marble of the museum's facade,
a timeline recorded in a giant sequoia's tree rings,
a giant squid plucked from the aphotic abyss,
a blue whale as massive as an ocean god incarnate,
the wild dogs gazing into the Serengeti sunset.
Most of all I remember the toothy height
of the *Tyrannosaurus* towering tiny armed

over my family and other museum visitors,
flanked on its left by its foe *Triceratops*
brandishing horns and a frill: the menagerie
of my coloring books escaped from their pages
to steer my life's course to these bones in Berlin—
That first pilgrimage capped with hot dogs
in the museum's food court while I beamed over
a toy *T. rex* molded from burgundy plastic.

Returning to New York two decades later, no longer
prone to my boyhood's unseeing wonder,
I could read the symbols in the bronze sight
of Roosevelt greeting me at the museum's entrance,
his horseback height cementing his head far above
the paired African and American natives attending
him on foot: the tarnished trio standard-bearers
for the halls within, where under the umbrella
of the uncivilized world, dark peoples deemed
inferior and doomed to the fate of Tasmanian tigers,
dodos, and great auks find themselves
relegated to the ranks of eagles and moose,
bongos and gorillas, and a centerpiece herd
of African elephants, their cultures whittled
down to whelk-shell costumes and carved tusks,
beast-stacking totems and raven-faced masks,
while among exhibits' periphery the ghost
of a museum director, once a champion of fossils
and eugenics, grimaced at my footsteps.

That was 2007. Now in Berlin, in this foreign city
become my home, I skirt the atrocities concealed
behind species christened out of Greek and Latin
—*Orycteropus*, *Proteles*, *Trichechus*, *Phataginus*—
their naming authors advancing after colonizing
bayonets into the voids carved out by genocides,

their soles wiped clean of gunpowder and blood
underfoot by the pursuit of romanticized discovery,
hypotheses peerless on an alabaster pedestal.
Working in the light of the mezzanine's window,
recording the lengths of the radius and ulna,
I sit in a shadow cast amid fanfare in 1937,
when down below in the museum's grand atrium,
the *Brachiosaurus* was unveiled to cameras flashing
upwards beneath its neck snaking to the ceiling,
a backdrop of swastikas blazoning the walls.

Other shadows inhabit emptied eye sockets,
recede into marrow cavities and vertebral crannies
to weather the curated forgetting—
Buried in the facelessness of our silence,
black omissions whisper from graves left unmarked,
insistent on restoring life to their decayed memory:
the shoulders that ported crates of specimens,
the lips that shared knowledge of roots and herbs,
birds and beasts, terrain and geography,
the hands that cleared paths and quarries
all resurface to undermine the blue-eyed fantasy
that the Earth was a naturalist's birthright to tame.

Taking the tibia in one hand, the calipers' gape I adjust
with the other, my fingers' exactitude unwavering,
as if hands like my own were never excluded
from this graveyard ordered into aisles, never denied
the nets and rifles that filled these shelves, never barred
from microscopes and scalpels, never banned
from learning housed in archives and libraries;
as if our manifold browns were never condemned
to a background invisibility, its trappings
of brooms pushed down hallways, flashlights to patrol
after hours, the ladles serving museum visitors.

Though not invisible, I remain a rarity, and—as any trophy hunter could tell you—rarity all too often merits a target upon your hide, as when a revered graybeard takes aim with his seminar topic—*Black people are not as smart as White people*—his erudite racism challenged by averted eyes and silence, just as when among attic antlers, a curator makes time to shoot her question—*Who are you, and what do you think you're doing?*—blind to your dangling visitor's badge, or when, in your head, out creeps the voice of a craniologist hunting in the nineteenth century—*Whom could I perhaps pay now, so I can collect his skull and measure its volume after his death?*—Despite the shelter found in deadening your retinas, steadfast wonder does little to deafen your ears.

Finished with the fibula, I rest its slender length with the other bones in its cardboard coffin before I turn to the next boxed aardvark, rifling around to pluck out a humerus. To wholly marvel again at its aardvark biology—the thirty-centimeter tongue, its dentine teeth missing enamel, nocturnal secrecy and its subsistence on termites, ants, and the occasional cucumber, the fact that it lingers on after thirty million years of evolution as the last survivor of its lineage—I try to re-cinch the awe once inuring my eyes, with its tatters pretend that these bones of this misfit among mammals were always intended to pass into my hands.