

Dead Bones

By Allison Fine
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My father was a paleontologist. I am a photographer. I shoot live things. The dead things sing, however. They laugh, they tell the stories of old, and their past is like soft rumblings with a big price tag.

Thunder and lightening have nothing on the flashes of brilliance and insight that dead bones speak of, my father once told me. He was always justifying himself, as if parenthood was a burden. I just wanted him to love me. He would talk endlessly. Love were measured in how many words you could utter in a day. His talk was mostly garbage but every so often I would listen to his rant on the bones of the dead.

“They are the ancestors, we appraise the past, and they lived it.”

I prefer to shoot the living. I am a photographer. The silences of those who come to model for me in my studio are interesting; those moments before they can think or act. Not that they ever really think or act, those models. They are blank. Lately I've thought about buying a rifle and shooting targets at the local rifle range. The Models are making me feel this way and I will blame them for it.

Dead bones do not speak as my father thought they did. Their eloquence lies precisely in their stupidity. Just as eloquent as the models. No one knows if the bones are real. Perhaps aliens from another star system planted them there.

I shoot the living dead, archiving them in albums, magazines and contact sheets. My father was under the illusion he was resurrecting the dead; bringing them alive in

some kind of historical context. Both of us may be wrong. Imagination and awareness do not always intersect with truth.

I look at books of great photographers now and again, but mostly I am a fashion photographer and those I study have flat bellies, gorgeous, sensual lips and terrified eyes. They are young girls that submission has splashed across the palette of the camera onto the pages of magazines. The photographers are often lustful, wanton men with terrible cravings. The girls are often sad, misfit and lonely girls. I am like all of them. I watch. That is what I do best. Women desire me but do not like me and I will not tell them what I see behind their eyes.

My downfall: the Chinese girl. She was beautiful in a way an American girl could not be. Strong, wanton, lustful, strange, not submissive, with a mind like a razor, at the University getting her PhD in Paleontology. I did not see any kind of ironic reference to the past. Things lay where they lay. There was so much intelligence in her that I was certain much of it was wasted. After all, what could you do with so much intelligence?

She spent her days teaching, studying and writing and her nights fucking. I was one part of the fucking nights. I wanted all the nights but I only got what I got. I don't know all the others, although occasionally I would be walking and see someone gaze my way and I'd think: he must have fucked her. Sometimes it would be a woman. This girl was not particular about the sex of whom she fucked; it didn't matter. Bodies were bodies to her.

Fan Aolan. She explained the meaning of her name. "Chinese names have more significance than American-English names," she said.

We name people in a willy-nilly, haphazard way: the names we give our kids are meaningless and the family names are atrocious. Fan was her family name and it goes way back—she's not sure how far but certainly thousands of years.

Her great-grandparents were educated farmers, from the Shandong province in northeast China and her grandfather had a chair at Beijing University. Her father was also a professor and her mother a physicist of some renown. Brains were a hereditary factor in Aolan's life.

“How could your great-grandparents be educated farmers?” I asked.

“Explain this.”

“They worked land for a wealthy landowner who liked my great-grandfather and sent him to the local school to learn to write and read, and then, being the curious man he was, he went further and took more courses and read more and more about various things. The landowner also took him under his wing; told him many things opened his library up. And of course, my great-grandfather shared his knowledge with my great-grandmother, although this was kept in secret. You know, attitudes toward women were awful in those days.

Anyway, great-grandfather was an historian of his region—many books on the history, temples and all sorts of things. My mother has these things locked away in a trunk somewhere.”

“So, what about you?”

“I'm not interested in history—it's stupid. Now is the orgasm, not tomorrow. I come now not later.”

She teased my cock with her tongue.

Aolan taught English to recently immigrated Chinese people. Our nights together were filled with lies and candle-lit baths. Her apartment had a curious western-eastern flavor; a little bit of both, but with the eastern part taking a back seat. She was voracious about American culture, demolishing it in her requirement for consumption. I listened to her laugh and deride our stupid mess of a culture while emulating it.

I took many, many pictures of Aolan. Her breasts were small and perfect. She did not have the fat American girls have—there was nothing on her hips--her tiny waist and absolutely flat stomach took my breath away. There was nothing about her body that was not perfect.

I made her masturbate while I got off pictures of her coming; mouth open, breathing in gasps, one still shot after another. Intense and carnal.

She complied, perhaps out of curiosity and because she thought that later on she could control me. That was her way. Sexually she was not soft; in every way she was predatory. She could be cruel and her mental capacity frightened me. She had a way of knowing my thoughts and torturing me with them.

In our long nights together I would indulge jealousy as a pastime.

“How many men, how many?” I implored, plunging deep into her vagina, feeling the soft folds open and close around my penis, her breath coming high and hard. How many?

“I don’t know!” she’d gasp, pushing my chest away, as if to ram me out of there. It would make me plunge even harder, deeper.

“Fucking whore,” I said, slapping her face just as she was about to explode.

The slap put tears in her eyes and she averted her head, but still came, nevertheless. Nothing would stop her orgasms. I could only pull out and watch her writhe in frustration, but even that became uninspiring. I'd rather watch her peak than deny it.

Aolan never called me, never e-mailed me, never made a move toward me. She had already hunted me down, and was content to keep me wet and wary in her private den, waiting for the moments of time strung together like sweat beads. She had many lovers and friends and a full life. It was only I; my insatiable need to come inside of her that kept our relationship alive. That was a source of anger.

"Why don't you call me?" I asked her over lunch in one of our favorite restaurants.

"I don't do that."

"Why?"

"How should I know?" she smiled, trailing eggplant into her little sucking mouth.

I took my hand and swiped her mouth, pushing the food into her face.

"You're mean--and one of these days I am going to shove you right out of my life and into the gutter where you belong," she said, reaching down to grab the napkin that had fallen from her lap onto the floor.

"I don't like you at all," I lied.

"No, but you lust after me all the same, don't you?"

I was drinking vodka. I could handle her any movement, any mood, drunk. It was all a trick—a flick of the phrase, a turn here and there. She was easy when I was drunk. That is what I told myself. I loved trying to make her cry and hurt; I never succeeded. I

was a total failure as a man of mystery. My every feeling was on my sleeve, and she just hated my whining.

Still, whining or no, she had me strung out so bad I went into withdrawal after two days of not seeing her. A man cannot take addiction; it makes him mean, ferocious, desperate like a wounded animal slinking around the corners of the jungle. Addicted men are the damaged goods of culture; we've been hurt so bad we don't know whether we are animate or not. Animal or not. Animate. Animal. The words slide around each other.

I was gone on Fan Aolan.

She opened the window onto my torture chamber and parked herself there, checking to make sure I was suffering. I hated her and I had to fuck her.

The waters are wide within the folds of a woman's intellect. It holds the reins on her emotional self, which is an ocean of demands. Those demands demean the very structure of the man; they flatten his dreams and make him cold. The nature of the earth is that men and woman dance and fight; the nature of earth is that men and women dance and hate, the nature of the earth is that men and women must procreate, so there it is. I am not part of the small body of men that love men, or let us say, choose men over women as a default choice. I must be with a woman; I sink without her soft breasts and hard soul. I sink.

"You are one moody son of a bitch," Aolan laughed. We were walking through the zoo. She had a thing for animals.

"I love the way elephants move."

"They're big and clumsy and ugly as hell. What could you possibly like about them?"

“They remember me, and I like that.” She narrowed her eyes. I hated her mystery; it made me want to kill her. Animals were animals, I concluded.

“Look, even monkeys have more fun than we do.” She pointed to some chattering, ugly little things scimmaging around fake rocks.

“I hate the zoo. Let’s drive out into the desert and have sex in the car.”

She smiled.

“How imaginative.” She disdained me and moved ahead. I followed her like a desperate little dog.

“Please?” I begged.

“Okay, but not in the car. Can’t you come up with something more radiant?”

“Well, here’s a luminous idea. My friend has a cabin in the mountains outside Sedona.”

“By the time we get there I’ll be hungry, you’ll be tired and grouchy, and all we’ll want to do is eat and sleep.”

“It’s only four hours drive. We could talk.”

“About what?”

Her eyes sought mine with total clarity and thoughtlessness.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, we have nothing to say to one another. Isn’t that obvious?”

“Not to me. It’s not obvious to me.”

“Well, no one said you were gifted, did they?” She smiled as we got to the car. I hated her more than ever. I decided that the only way to rid myself of the helplessness

was to kill her. In lieu of that, I would fuck her. I was bound to it. Across that wide river of her cruelty lay an elephant waiting to stomp me to death.

“Get in,” I said, driving off in a hurry to get rid of her. Not fucking her might be the only punishment she would understand.

“Where are we going?” she asked as I drove as fast as hell away from that repulsive museum of animals and out into the desert.

“I don’t know. Patagonia. Wherever.”

“Why?”

“I know people there.”

Mastodons

Did I mention Aolan dreamed of being a dead animal? She had dreams she was a Mastodon.

Only one who loved elephants as much as she did could have those kinds of dreams.

Mastodons are part of an extinct group of elephant mammals that lived during the early Miocene period, twenty million years ago. I wondered if there was a human or thinking element in the universe twenty million years ago. My father told me that animals passed down memory in their genes from one generation to the next. So Aolan was right when she said the elephants remembered her.

What did they remember? I wondered. I mean they did not have a storytelling tradition did they? How did they remember, with their cells or brains or DNA? Did

memory lie embedded in the mitochondria? I would go into spiraling realms of thought about memory. Is it real or it not?

“What good is memory?” I asked her once. Aolan pursed her lips and sat silent.

The Mastodons of the Miocene period were vegetarian forest dwellers—mostly peaceful animals with shaggy coats. I imagine it was their sheer size and bulk that scared other animals off, although they had those huge trunks to defend themselves. I began to feel like a Mastodon around Aolan. My shaggy coat and hulking size did not create a mystery in her mind, however. She was a more highly evolved species: woman. A species ready to kill me with weapons I could not see or touch or feel; the weapons of contempt and disdain.

“I feel nothing for those who abuse animals,” she told me. Yet I was her animal, her seduction berating me into evil. I was simply lying around waiting for her ice age to freeze the hell out of my balls and be done with it.

Walter Granger, the famous paleontologist who worked with his wife in the earlier part of the 20th century, went on fossil hunts in the Gobi desert traveling up the Yangtze River in China. Aolan told me about this because her grandfather met Granger while he was doing his research, and even helped him a bit. Her family kept field notes and diaries left behind by her grandfather and her father.

It blows me away that people can be that dedicated about the bones of dead ancestors and animals, but then, my father was one of these people, and I was addicted to fucking the daughter of this energy. Aolan might have been getting her degree in Paleontology but she already had a PhD in making me sick. I repeatedly told her to switch to someone else. She did not listen to me.

“Study the behavior of humans as they are in the present!” I shouted at her on one of our fuck and fight days. “Who cares what they were?”

“First of all, Paleontologists don’t just study humans, dumb ass, because humans don’t go very far back. Aren’t you curious, just a little, as to what inhabited the earth before we got here?”

“No, not even a small tad.” I kissed her breasts, her stomach, and her thighs. She pulled away. It was the fight part of the fuck.

I have been known to admit that without conflict I cannot sustain an erection. The truth is conflict turns me on; it makes me hard. Nasty, quarrelsome women give me the urge to procreate and defecate. Perhaps they are the same. I like my pain and pleasure in the same place.

Aolan was not as fucking crazy as I was. She could handle many men, many nights; many sexual advances without so much as the flick of an eyelid. She was cool, detached and arid in her movement; her emotional terrain like the desert we lived in. The birds and wildflowers graced her edges, but the deep hard core was an Ice Age waiting to happen.

I decided to die or make her die; kill her. I could not live with her alive. My work was suffering. I stopped bookings in my studio, I fired the receptionist, (whom I had been fucking anyway), soon the phone stopped ringing. I was dead. My work sat in conjugated piles all over the floor. The darkroom grew dusty and all the negatives hung like sad, victims after the holocaust. No one wanted them and they were starved beyond recognition. My creativity was shriveling up like Aolan’s capacity for love. She was my death and I was her liberation. It sucked.

I wasn't to blame for anything that happened after this. I made the decision but the Gods took it out of my hands. There is fate, there is accident, there is synchronous motion; there is intersection. They are all the same as far as I'm concerned. I have nothing to do with it except a wish and a wish is not a dream my heart made.

"You are much ado about nothing," she told me.

"I am something."

"You have not taken any pictures of me in a month of Sundays."

"A month of Sundays—what kind of a fucking asinine expression is that?"

"People say it."

"No one in this century. Okay, Fred Astaire, maybe."

"Expressions come and go."

"Talking of Michelangelo."

We fucked again, just after I quoted T.S. Eliot to her, but she didn't get the reference so it was a wasteland. I read her Gregory Corso and Gary Snyder. Poetry was also pointless with her.

"I like science. I like Mastodons. I like animals. Let's go to the zoo."

I would kill her at the zoo, I decided. It was peaceful, it was symmetrical, and it was sane. She could be thrown among the wild boars at feeding time. They would tear her beautiful body to shreds, the skin hanging in tatters off her stomach and her arms and breasts; blood running all over her face into her eyes and nostrils. She would cry and scream and stop suddenly; eyes open in terror. The bitch would be dead. This fantasy kept me alive many nights.

"I can't support you, you know. I just have my studio work. It's not much."

“Why don’t you go back to school and get a degree?”

I have a degree.”

“I mean, something real.”

“I’m not that ambitious.”

I was a lazy fucking slut that sucked off women. That was all.

I decided to combine her Paleontology, some Art references and my Photography to make a kind of Dead Art Soup. This I could then exhibit. Some friend had a gallery. I could make a show.

Aolan loved the idea.

Reconstructing the dead animals took some research. I was half hoping she would become one of the animals: dead, ripped apart and papered on a slab of wood. A kind of reptilian therapist in 3-D. I could designate her Agnathan: a jawless fish with a covering of denticles like the shagreen skin of a shark. She could be a flattened fish taking her food from sediment from the bottom of whatever waters she lived in. A clueless, emotionless eating machine sucking entrails shit and cast off skin from other sea animals.

I constructed a figure of a fish with pieces of photos of her body. The piece became three dimensional and decidedly inhuman and weird, but gripping. When Aolan saw me making this in my studio she was curious and appalled at the same time. It was a monument to her death. I entitled it “Dentricle Death.”

I then discovered a curious and strange animal from my father’s research called *Procynosuchus delayhayi*. It looked like something from the files of Lewis Carroll, part tiger, part Platypus, part hyena, leopard and something else indefinable. It was ugly and

beautiful and I decided to use the digital reconstruction of this so-called ancestor as a starting point for another photo-sculpture.

The green eyes of this animal stared out at me as I worked on other parts of the piece. I made a kind of half-smile of the mouth, the nostrils slightly flared. It was an ugly animal with a certain kind of weird sweetness. I fell in love with it, and at the same time I felt a bittersweet pang. I knew this animal may not have even looked like this, and even if he did, he would never live again. It was a digital rendering of a computerized extrapolation; a thought spun into existence by the very things that spin out thoughts: imagination. I lived in an alternative world as I pasted a giant replica of his photo into the side of my project. I began to wonder, was I real? The only thing that convinced me so was Aolan and her stupid games, the games that kept me alive.

She had one look at this giant project of mine, the multi-media extravaganza that was threatening to engulf my entire living space, and looked up at me with her sweetest, most expectant face.

“Do we have any chocolate?”

Her timing was impeccable. The bakery down the street specialized in the kind of chocolate éclair people used to make during the thirties; real chocolate, real pudding, dough rolled thin and rich and laced with vanilla and coconut and whatever else I can't name. It was so decadent I came eating it. The pleasure of rolling it around in my mouth was heart stopping, spiritually affirming, an epiphany of mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. I was anxious to stop work so we could buy a dozen éclairs and smear them all over each other; our bodies would roll in the moment of chocolate, pudding, sugar and icing.

We bought six and ate them with a shared knife. Every so often Aolan would take the knife in her delicate little hand and wave it front of my face just to let me know I was only alive at her mercy; existence was in her hands, so to speak. I felt chastised and terrific at the same time. Éclairs done, she wanted to make love. My stomach was so bloated I wanted to float away on the river of my dreams. I hoped I'd dream of Procynosuchus delayhayi, his green and gorgeous eyes penetrating my belly and nestling there like caviar. Instead, Aolan wanted to nestle there and beat Latin rhythms all night long into my ass. I took it. The project would have to wait.

Animal Dreams

Knowing Aolan was like rediscovering the interior life of my animal. My animal: the prehistoric tiger-thing that lay at the base of my skull and became the central focus of the art thing I was constructing in my studio. The construction covered the entire space and became ugly, knarled and cumbersome each day I worked on it. My interior life was bloated like a dead fish; it lay inside my stomach and rotted to the core, reaching into the sinews of my muscles and tendons and blood and gristle and bones. I was becoming dead bones. This interior animal life cannot be expressed in external, western imagery—it must snake out of you like bile excreted from the pores of your skin. It demands that you sink into it, dream fitfully; heart pounding, sweating, breathing, quickly startled awake

and flying back into the net of your past lives. It was the animal interior that drove me to finish the piece. It was the animal interior that beckoned me to drive a wedge into Aolan's heart and watch her bleed slowly on the bed, looking at me with glazed eyes. I murdered her in my sleep.

My interior life goes back to the beginning of time—it is prehistoric, and hence I must work with prehistoric imagery; it has no name or hour; it works without words. Even its images are large and clumsy, filled with awkward shapes and burgeoning size that threatens to engulf my own small body. Aolan became quite frightened at the process of my interior animal as he/she stalked the edges of our times together, moving further and further inward into the heart of the hatred we called love. Animal talking, morning fucking, working on the piece. It all became one slow motion, movement; dance. Thigh and leg muscles, forearm: I created them all, haunting this malicious creature was my Animal fashioning its very breath. I was a God.

Aolan, however, was infinitely alive, as alive as anyone I had ever known. What she did when we did not spend time together was filling me up with imagery that invaded my dreams. Yet, as the piece took up more and more space and time, those dreams and images receded. I stopped jealously guarding her time and her body; it was one long fuck anyway and the animal more and more crowded out her time, the beast I was working on. Soon it became apparent that Aolan was becoming jealous of my work and my work was taking the place of our relationship. It was a clear sound like a crystal bell. I was moving away from her and into my own interior; stalking the beast of prehistoric time. She was intrigued, hurt, resentful, jealous and curious. She became desperate and when her

desperation reached its final stages I began to enjoy hiding from her. The roles became reversed and I reveled in the joy of watching her frustration mount daily.

“You are obsessed with this animal thing,” she pointed at my sculpture, her mouth twisted into a sneer of disgust.

“It’s a monument to our love,” I told her.

“It’s totally repellent. I hate you and I hate it. I am leaving you for good. There’s someone else, anyway. He is normal.”

“There’s no such thing as normal, that’s an illusion. You know that, don’t you?”

I slabbered pieces of cloth and colored, painted paper onto the structure that had come to fill up my entire two room apartment. There was hardly room to love. No room to move. I ate on the floor, next to my animal. My animal’s tale brushed my face as I slept. It was cryptic and it was incestuous.

“I think you are nuts. You’re going crazy. You should see a therapist.”

“You should join a whore house and get paid for what you do,” I replied.

She slapped my face and left.

I did not see her again.

I am living inside the animal now, day and night. A local art gallery has offered me a huge sum of money to exhibit my animal. I have agreed. They turned down my photographs in the past repeatedly, but my animal has taken their imagination. My animal has become the reason I am alive, the sole connection between the past and the future and me at the present. I do not need love or sex or even food because my animal feeds me. I am living inside my sexual desire; my father and myself: it is all part of the memory of

every piece of shit that has gone to create this structure I call “Dead Bones.”

Prochnyosuchus kills me and keeps me alive. All other life forms can go to hell.