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## Mos Teutonicus

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# MOS TEUTONICUS

**General Objective:**

*To provide the students with an opportunity to study the skeletons of numerous animals they find in the ecosystem.*

**Background Information:**

*It is quite common for biologists studying wildlife populations to examine skeletal fragments to determine aspects of a species' natural history . . . In order to learn more about an animal from which a bone originated, it is helpful to know where in the animal's body the bone was located. Many similarities in bone structure exist among species that have a common evolutionary history . . . Anatomical structures that have a similar evolutionary origin are commonly referred to as **homologous structures** by scientists. Once the observer has learned how the bones of a human are shaped and articulated, this knowledge can be applied to other species as varied as a Blue Whale weighing 150 tons and a Pygmy Shrew weighing one-ninth of an ounce.*

**Procedure:**

*You will be provided with a disarticulated skeleton of an animal. Be very careful to keep the bones of your set together. Make every effort to avoid mixing bones from different skeletons or losing bones from the set. Human skeletal models have been placed at your work area for comparison study and to assist you in answering the questions that follow.*

(Gary M. Ferrence, "Skeleton Fragments," *Fundamentals of Environmental Biology*, 3<sup>RD</sup> edition)

I.

*In the deep brush beside the stream, we stumbled across bones. Hidden from the farmhouse by the steep hillside, my friends and I could easily have imagined ourselves lost in the deep woods,*

kicking away dried grass and carefully pulling aside spiked thistle until the intact skeleton of a deer emerged. Leathered hide clung to the bones, tatters of dried skin and bristled hair. The smell wasn't bad, just the faint sweetness of long-rotted flesh. So we wrapped our fingers around the antlers and pulled. The last fingers of grass held for a moment, then tore. We dragged the deer out of the stream valley straight up to the house. We felt this would be a possession worth the effort, even if its value was not yet clear.

This was the summer after ninth grade, the year my chubbiness melted and my shortness grew away. I'd stretched to five feet nine inches, no monster, but tall enough to imagine a towering future. I weighed only 120 pounds, so my own bones poked at my hide, particularly the knobs of my wrists. There, I could easily overlap my index finger and thumb, pinching across the narrow space and wondering when it might thicken into the beefy farmer's muscles of my father. I didn't know that I'd reached my full height, nor that I'd eventually swap the anxiety of the scrawny for the worry of middle-aged paunch.

Dragging the deer skeleton toward my house seemed like the right kind of challenge for a group of kids infatuated with *Dead Poets Society*, a film that less than a year before had encouraged our vaguely literary aims. The deer carcass seemed like something existential, or at least a sort of limited proto-existentialism accessible to nascent high-schoolers. Its grittiness offered a morbid and alluring invocation of mortality. We all came from upper-middle class families that created children drawn to such notions of existentialism, even as our lives were bereft of the suffering that goes along with it. Of the seven in the group, six had at least one parent who was a professor at the local university, and the other had a chiropractor father and a mother who happened to be the AP English teacher at the high school. Even my father, the farmer, was really a biology professor by day.

When we first found the deer, it was my friends who had wanted to claim it. I'd wondered why, even balked inwardly at the rightness of the act. Partly, the deer was just another carcass to me. My father had killed many over the years, driving a neat hole through their lungs with a .30-06. A dead deer hung in the backyard walnut tree each winter, its smooth muscle exposed to the air after my father yanked the skin and hide free. He

hacked it first into rough quarters with a sharp hatchet and a large knife, then he and my mother used smaller knives inside to divide the hunks into cuts of meat headed for our freezer. Our dogs gnawed the leftover bones for weeks. My brother and I had each shot deer too, as well as squirrels, and rabbits, and pheasant, and groundhog, and sometimes throngs of gathering autumn blackbirds that fell in clumps after each shotgun blast.

None of my friends had likely ever shot a gun, nor even touched one, save John. Sometime during elementary school, I'd snuck him into my parents' bedroom, withdrew a leather gun case from beneath their bed, carefully unzipped it, and showed him the smooth walnut stock of one of my father's rifles. There was magic in that moment, I thought, the revelation of the dangerous, the violation of the house rule to never touch a gun without my father present, the sweet tonic of gun oil and the burl of polished wood.

My friends did not know the feel of a dead animal, had never killed, nor slaughtered. The dead deer drew them in, made them adamant. In particular, a girl for whom I still harbored desperate adolescent love wanted that deer, and so I wanted it too. My friends sensed their own magic in the unfamiliar proximity to decay. It was this I believe they wished to possess, maybe even contain.

We dragged the animal to the house, deposited it by the back door. My father came outside, regarded the skeleton with the combined pride of hunter and biologist. *That's a big one*, he said, *and it's all there*. Immediately, he noticed the tatters of flesh clinging to the bones, smelled the unmistakable cloud of rot. He suggested that we find an ant hill and drag the deer atop it. The ants would emerge, he explained, to eat away the remaining flesh. In a few months, the bones would be picked clean, and we'd be left with a pristine, entire skeleton. Ants would work as a kind of natural process of *mos teutonicus*, the medieval practice of boiling away royal flesh to safeguard remains. Long ago, bodies in need of transport had to be reduced to bone to prevent rot, as the appearance of decay was a visual reminder of the wickedness of impermanence, and, I imagine, more than a little unpleasant to travel beside. First boiled, then flayed, the bone became free of flesh, of putrefaction, of the reminder of ever-present mortality. Afterward, the skeleton could be carried long distances for proper burial without fear of degeneration.

We followed my father's directions and dragged the deer across the driveway to the old orchard. We found an ant hill a few yards away from the compost heap and centered the deer across the opening. We would return. We would check it often. We would experience the enlightenment of excarnation.

II.

I was six years old the first time I broke an arm. We hadn't moved out to the farm yet, but I spent plenty of time there while my parents worked to make the house more or less livable. My friend Jeff came with me one day, and the two of us crawled around the barn, eventually winding up hanging on the front paddock gate. We began to play there, letting go, falling back, catching ourselves with our fingertips. I remember the giddiness of free fall, a slight twist in the stomach as my back rushed toward the ground followed by the solidity of my fingers catching wood.

I don't quite remember falling, nor precisely how it happened. For more than thirty years, Jeff and I have joked about the fall as a consequence of his deciding to up the ante and shake the

*Some corner of my memory suggests that I invented the story to prevent my parents from punishing my carelessness.*



fence. I'm not sure that he ever actually did that, and some corner of my memory suggests that I invented the story to prevent my parents from punishing my carelessness. Whether he did or didn't shake the fence, I failed to catch it and,

instead, flung myself upon the concrete threshold between barn and yard. While I cannot remember the feeling of impact, I can easily recall what followed: a sharp pain, then the dull sensation of a heavy, useless limb, leaden, an arm suddenly external from my consciousness.

III.

To X-ray a one-year-old, a technician must first promise a sticker from a ten-cent sheet of low-grade *Toy Story* images, maybe two if he feels particularly generous or guilty. To earn that, the

crying one-year-old must lie down on a dingy metal slab, then submit to having an industrial-gray strap tightened around his hips. The one-year-old will be instructed to lie still, and the technician will scowl at the involuntary heaving of shoulders that might spoil the shot. The father must don a heavy lead apron to protect his own testicles from piercing radiation, all while considering the destruction of his sperm reasonable: no worthy parent should stand by and subject his son to this sort of procedure. There will be a mechanical buzz, audible because the child's sobs have turned to wide-eyed fright. The sticker will be received, grasped in the boy's left hand and regarded with moist eyes. His smile will seem like an indictment, an unearned forgiveness offered too easily.

Next, a rushed pediatric orthopedist will remark on the oddity of seeing cloth diapers in Western Pennsylvania. *Are you from Seattle?* he will ask the parents. The father will recognize this as an insult to his home region, an implication of the backwardness of Appalachia in comparison to elsewhere, but he will also feel pride. He and the mother *are* Seattle kinds of parents, which will let them ignore the orthopedist's condescension or, perhaps, share in it. They will pretend to be breezy and calm during this brief small talk that further delays the information they have come to learn. Already, they will have driven an hour-and-a-half to a suburban satellite of the city Children's Hospital, and they will have brought their happy one-year-old into the bland business park, and they will have watched him grow steadily bored and cranky while he waited an hour past the appointment time for which the parents have been instructed to under no circumstances be late.

With the orthopedist, the father will speak in a version of overly precise medical jargon, explaining how his son *presents weakness* in his right hand, that he only ever crawled commando-style, dragging his right arm and leg while he chased the dog around the house. The parents will explain that their child has merely expressed an early preference for left-handedness. The father will attempt to demonstrate that, while he is not from Seattle, he is in fact from rural Western Pennsylvania, he is intelligent, that he has a doctorate too, albeit as a specialist in literature instead of bones, terrified that not demonstrating such intelligence will lead to the disdain of the doctor, which

was probably inevitable anyway. The mother will explain how a family friend, a doctor herself, noticed the way the boy's right foot dragged when he walked and suggested this appointment. The mother will confess that her own father had noticed the boy not using his right hand as much as his left, and that the mother and father discarded the information as another of the regular paranoid ideas of a chronic worrier.

The orthopedist will ask the boy to walk down the hallway, and he will watch as the boy complies. The one-year-old will be happy again. He will walk and grin, turn and walk back. He will turn his right foot forty-five degrees, and the toes of that foot will drag along the industrial carpet. The orthopedist will frown in the way doctors frown. He will turn abruptly back to the examination room and sit. The boy will return also, into his mother's lap. The father will think about the light box on the wall, and about his own familiarity with orthopedists. He will recollect spinning cast saws, and the soggy odor of fresh plaster, and the ghostly vision of his own bones hung on the wall. He will remember slowness and fright and the sharp smell of antiseptic. The orthopedist will flick on the light box on this wall, and the ghostly vision of the one-year-old's pelvis will appear. The father will pretend to understand.

*First of all, this isn't orthopedic*, the doctor will say. He will gesture at the X-ray and explain how there are no signs of hip dysplasia, that the leg bones are normal. The structure is good. He will run the flat side of his reflex hammer along the underside of each of the boy's feet. He will nod to himself, confirming something he suspected when the left toes curl downward as the tool scrapes from the heel forward and the right toes curl up, making the Babinski response. The father will not know, yet, that Joseph Babinski was a late-nineteenth-century French neurologist of Polish ancestry. He will not consider the coincidences of convergence: of French for the mother's career and Polish for the father's heritage and Joseph as a mutual name for neurologist and child. The father and the mother will not understand, yet, why the orthopedist nods after the test, why he refers the child to a neurologist, what he means when he says, *It will become orthopedic. They always do*. The orthopedist will begin speaking about *hemiplegia*. This he will not explain either, perhaps convinced by the father's earlier feigning use of medical jargon. The father does not understand the term. Afterward,

the parents will drive an hour and a half home, the weary boy falling asleep within minutes of being strapped down again, this time into his car seat.

Later, on the phone with another friend who happens to be a doctor, the father will scoff at what the orthopedist implied. He will say that it probably means nothing, and the friend will agree, until the father mentions Babinski. Then the friend can no longer be just a friend, and must now be a friend who is a doctor. *Oh*, he will say, *that's different*. The friend's tone of voice will change, will become a bit more formal, and his timbre will flatten to indicate seriousness. His voice will be that of a doctor now, a good and caring one, but precise. The friend will explain what the orthopedist did not or would not explain, that the Babinski response is a clear sign of neurological trauma, likely cerebral palsy, *hemiplegia* referring to the affliction of only one side of the body. A neurologist will later confirm this diagnosis.

To X-ray a one-year-old, the father must be prepared to learn what he does not wish to know.

#### IV.

One afternoon when I was in third grade, I climbed onto a fallen log that crossed the stream at the bottom of the hill below the farmhouse. I stuck my arms in the air, walked as if on a balance beam, then slipped on the mossy bark. Moments after landing on a stack of old boards rotting in the grass of the lower pasture, I raised my right arm into the air and felt the unmistakable heft of a break. I walked back to the house, tearless, and informed my mother that I'd broken my arm. She did not at first believe me, considering the calm in her nine-year-old. But she knew my arm hurt enough for a trip to the emergency room, where the doctors confirmed broken arm number two.

A few weeks later, still wearing the cast protecting the chip in my elbow, I chased a ball into the wood-mulched flower garden surrounding my friend's house. It had been raining, so the wood was slick, and my balance was compromised by haste and plaster. I slipped, could not catch myself since one arm was occupied by a ball and the other was out of service. I banged my head on the glass cover to their electric meter.

Dazed, I walked into the driveway, where John looked directly at my head and began to cry. When the first drips of blood began to fall across my face, I began to cry too. His



mother was a nurse, and she dragged me into their bathroom and began pouring water onto the wound. Blood filled the sink as she assured me in her heavy Greek accent, *One stitch only, maybe two*, explaining that head wounds always bleed this way.

V.

Cerebral palsy, or CP, is a specific-sounding term for conditions that range widely in both manifestation and severity. The Latin roots of the term identify the underlying cause of such conditions: *cerebral*, as in dealing with the cerebrum portion of the brain, and *palsy*, paralysis. The expression of cerebral palsy, however, does not involve physical paralysis, or at least not technically. Instead, cerebral palsy is categorized into two main types, with further finer distinctions. *Spastic* or *pyramidal* cerebral palsy designates chronic muscle tightness, like a permanent muscle cramp, and results from damage to the strands of nerves running from the cortex to the brain stem called pyramidal tracts. *Non-spastic* or *extrapyramidal* cerebral palsy designates decreased muscle tone and is often associated with involuntary movement or tremors. In these kinds of CP, the damage has occurred outside of the pyramidal tracts, and is further subdivided into *ataxic* and *dyskinetic* cerebral palsy.

CP can affect both motor control and cognitive ability.

CP is non-progressive.

As an injury to the brain, often from a stroke, CP is without cure. Unlike a bone fracture, which can be set to ensure proper healing, a damaged brain does not regenerate.

In describing CP, the prefix *quadri* refers to impact on all four limbs—in fact, to both sides of the brain—while *hemi* refers to impact on two limbs, due to damage in only one hemisphere of the brain. The suffix *plegia* refers to paralysis, and *paresis* to weakness.

VI.

For my third broken bone, I merely fell out of bed in the middle of the night, smacking my right arm against the heat register. My father called home from Wyoming, in the first leg of a sabbatical tour of the western national parks. My mother filled him in on the news. *Your daughter bought a new puppy. Your youngest son broke his arm again.*

I was in sixth grade, and when I returned to school I listened, mortified, as the teacher explained to the class: “Matt got into a wrestling match with his bed sheets.”

## VII.

My friends never looked for the deer skeleton again. I checked on it occasionally, looking in on the ants’ progress. My father had been right. By the end of the summer, the tattered flesh had been eaten away, leaving only sun-bleached bone. My friends never saw this, nor asked about the skeleton, nor apparently ever thought again about the deer after its discovery. There, too, we considered the deer differently. To them, it had been the find of the moment, the excitement of a singular occasion. It had been about the thrill of a deer skeleton. For me, who cared little for the specifics of deer, the thrill had been something else, a threshold of mutual discovery and connection and of future excursions into ourselves.

*The thrill had been something else, a threshold of mutual discovery and connection and of future excursions into ourselves.*

The deer skeleton was about the group, about being part of a group. The farm had long thrust isolation upon me, reinforced by the usual sense of adolescent awkwardness. The group, which melted away just as late summer afternoons gave way to chilly fall evenings, had offered a welcome sense of community. These were my people.

We stayed friends, and in some ways close friends, but things were soon different. Shortly after we started tenth grade, the others found upperclassmen who practiced a clearer and more direct sort of alternative artiness. They were professors’ kids, too, but ones whose greater age and clearer sense of self had more appeal. Those boys also had a band, and to this I had no defense. My friends started hanging out in town.

They included me once, long after the new relationships had been forged. We spent a Friday night driving dark streets in a rickety van. We snatched a shopping cart from the parking lot of a grocery store, feverishly pulling it through the rear doors of

the van before speeding off. The older boys wanted to stash it in a weedy ditch, then return another day to take moody photos. This was an aesthetic sophistication with which I was neither familiar nor fluent. They laughed and marveled at what they would do, while I bounced on the floor of the van's cargo space. I was bored, and it became clear to everyone that I wasn't really part of this new collection.

Though there came no moment to pinpoint the exile, I felt cast out. This exclusion felt inevitable to me, a consequence of growing up on the farm, where location posed a problem. My friends could walk to one another's houses, and they enjoyed spontaneous gatherings, street hockey and neighborhood games of mass tag, and trick-or-treating by foot instead of by car. I always needed permission from my parents to see friends, always needed a plan, and a schedule, and someone to drive me. This was an imposition, however unintentional, that created a certain childhood loneliness and an expectation of being left out, partly because I often was. I wandered the farm by myself, playing a game I called German 88s, carrying one of my arsenal of toy guns as I pretended to be a lone GI dropped off behind enemy lines to destroy Nazi positions.

In many ways, my feelings of high school exile were common. We all felt that way, I'm sure, even if I considered my geographic isolation as different and more profound. In the years that followed, the others were part of a new crew of friends who often visited the farm, particularly once we could drive. We played nighttime tag there, where I donned camo pants and a black T-shirt and distinguished myself as expert at hiding, never to be found. Eventually, such nights always wound to a sleepy close, my friends driving down the valley back home, while I watched the flash of tail lights disappear around the bend of our dead-end street. I stripped off my dark clothing and felt the quiet of a farm night as equal parts solitude and loneliness.

The deer skeleton lingered in the weeds of the old orchard, long freed from remnant flesh. Night animals crawled among the same low branches where I had spent hours hiding, crickets and katydids and cicadas and frogs sounding the dark. On some nights, I listened to the ethereal chirps and screams of raccoons, or the lowness of a distant owl, or the rustling of unknown creatures searching the shrubs beside the house. Each

seemed to reinforce a sense of separation that, even now, I find hard to embrace, that there is a difference between bone and flesh, that what lies at our center may make us ourselves, yet we live our lives mostly chasing tattered flesh. And high school remains forever the place where flesh is tattered. Eventually, the deer bones began to scatter, too, pulled apart by the raccoons and by coyotes, until nothing remained.

#### VIII.

Break number one was on the radial styloid process of my right arm, called a chauffeur's fracture. My age and the severity of the break meant that the arm had to be set under general anesthesia. I lay on the hospital bed, watched the black mask approach my face, smelled the rubber as it covered my mouth, then drew in fumes, a brief spinning in my head before, faster than is natural, I slipped under.

Break number two was on the radius head of my right arm, which in imperfectly healing helped me learn my right from my left. Faced with the question of turning one way or the other, I learned to check orientation by bending my elbows to reach each hand toward its respective shoulder. With my left, I could lay the palm flat. With my right, the arm stopped short, caught up by new bone, so I could barely brush the shoulder with my fingertips, a permanently limited range of motion.

Break number three was a hairline fracture of the left radius. At my first visit to the emergency room, the doctor guessed that my description correlated with a break even though the X-ray appeared fine. My prior experience of fractures, perhaps, convinced him to trust my intuition, so he applied a temporary cast. The next day, the orthopedist sawed off the cast to shoot another X-ray. Enough time had passed to allow the thin fracture to open and appear on the film as a bent worm. For the first time I received a fiberglass cast instead of a plaster one. While light enough to let me almost forget its presence, its gnarled surface also resisted signatures, the ink soaking into the dents and making my friends' practiced scripts ghostly.

#### IX.

Because our son was only a year and a half old and unlikely to hold still for the extended periods of time an MRI requires, a CT

scan was the only option to make a sure diagnosis. This would likely have required sedation, the numbing of the senses so we ourselves could gain a sense of surety.

We balked at the tests, concerned by the risks of sedation and, worse, the potential cancer risk associated with the relatively high radiation dose of a CT scan rarely calibrated properly

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for a young body. The neurologist assured us of the prudence of that decision, that the tests were really only confirmation. Physical examinations had already told him enough to make a diagnosis of hemiparesis. Unless our son start-

ed to show more severe symptoms, the neurologist was confident in ruling out a tumor or other sort of progressive problem. He'd watch for change, but unless things got worse, there was little reason to worry.

Worry is, of course, not built upon reason. Though firm in our desire to protect our son from further damage or fright, we couldn't quite shake the fear that we weren't proceeding as we should.

Proceeding.

Procedure.

The precise language of medicine facing off against our growing recognition of the imprecision of life.

My wife and I came to realize that our decision was not one of proper procedure but, instead, of philosophy. Too often, disorders and diseases and conditions and all sorts of medical diagnoses appear technical. The body takes on the appearance of a machine, breakdowns attributed to worn or faulty parts that can be swapped or fixed. Physicians, then, function much like automobile mechanics. Diagnoses are made, followed by repair or replacement. The soul of the machine is a secondary consideration or, too often, considered irrelevant.

We chose instead, not without difficulty, to recognize our son's diagnosis as a description of his traits instead of an ailment. As our first appointment revealed, CP is not orthopedic, and I take that as a way of saying it is not structural. His bones

are not affected, and there is nothing to fix. We choose to focus on a little boy. The memory of his first X-ray makes it clear enough that a child's soul is often overlooked in favor of medical diagnosis.

We could have strapped him down again, or allowed the flooding of sedative into his tiny veins, and bombarded his tissue with radioactivity. We could have looked at a colorful image of his brain, light spots showing function, some dark spot revealing where the damage had been done. But this would tell us little we didn't already know, and it would tell us nothing about him. We could have relied on the technical as a way to avoid considering the actual structure, focused on the flesh of diagnosis instead of the bone of a life that will be lived with challenges different from our own.

Our son has never doubted his ability to live as a boy, has never even considered himself as anything other than as a boy. This is the wisdom of the child, something we should all aspire to, and it is no folly. He is all child, a climber, and a thrower, and a laugher, and a joker, and so many things never visible via medical imaging.

And, really, I know enough about the origins of his CP. I will never forget the half-light of the delivery room, many hours into a labor that my wife faced, by choice, without medications. I will never forget the exhaustion on her face as our son's head kept appearing, then receding back inside the birth canal. I will never forget how I prayed mightily, how I asked my long-dead grandmother to pray as well, how I hoped that the connection I somehow shared with her across the life-death divide would help. I will never forget the look on the midwife's face when she showed me the blue-gray umbilical cord, knotted in the center. She'd never seen one pulled so tight, she said, and I understood the implication of the words unspoken: never seen one pulled so tight on a baby delivered alive.

A body is structure and soul. I think about the literal structure of our bone as the finest metaphor for our truest self. Bone is alive, hardened and apparently rigid, yet teeming with a marrow and blood. Bone is alive as a soul is alive.

I think, too, about the misdirection of flesh, and appearance, and the temporary satisfaction of something that appears meaningful. I think about the old deer skeleton, and the eventual rotting away of skin that accompanied the erosion of friend-

ships, and my own inability to recognize the difference between surface and depth. I think about the surface knowledge of tests and how it compromises the desire within bone, seeks to boil away the flesh to see permanence. I think about how bone is not the end, that within it lies more life, cells and blood and soul. Tests seek the rigidity of the absolute, implying first that the absolute can be known and, further, that intervention is both necessary and helpful. Tests cannot find a soul, which merely desires the space to find itself.

Our son has been on the move since learning to walk, a desire that many have labeled as an instinct for self-therapy. His desire to run and jump has been recast from a boy's energy to therapeutic exercise, just as too many holiday presents from too many well-meaning family members have been offered with some eye toward their potential to improve his range of motion. But children do not exercise; they play. A ball is not for therapy, a board game not for right-hand-dexterity drills, a push wagon not for walking support, a scooter not to build leg strength. And a bicycle is not a tool to combat CP; it is a bike.

Our son does not "stretch his limits" or "commit to his own therapy." He does not think of clichés of birds being able to fly because they don't know they cannot, or the merits of facing obstacles and pushing through. Cliché is tattered flesh. Orthopedists are tattered flesh. CP is tattered flesh. CT scans are tattered flesh.

x.

Two decades after converting to my father's Lutheranism, my mother returned to the Catholic Church. There was a family meeting, and each parent explained the reasons for the theological split. The three children were given the choice of which way to go. My brother and sister remained Lutheran, and as a ninth grader driven by the clear appeal of homilies described to me as shorter than sermons, I became Catholic. Functionally, there was little difference between the procedures of the high Lutheran service we grew up in and the Catholic Mass, but even then I understood that, for my parents, the differences were keen and fundamental.

The timing of that conversion and the discovery of the deer skeleton seems to be more than coincidental, as entry into the Catholic Church also marked my entry into a theology that

honors the tradition of reliquaries. Where else should saintly souls reside than in the gnarled remains of bone and sinew? As Brenda Miller writes in “Basha Leah,” what bone scientists call *vertebra prominens* and Jewish faithfuls call the *luz* is an indestructible hub at the base of the spine from which our bodies will be rebuilt after death, and also a point that faces skyward when we bend forward reverently, when we humble ourselves to the unseen. How then could I ever deny the faith of French friends in Lorraine, who once proudly explained to us that their church possesses the knuckle of an apostle? How could I explain away the rush of emotion my wife felt when we lived in Paris, on the day she and my mother leaned forward to kiss the Crown of Thorns venerated at Notre Dame? Soul is bone. We are bone, forever ourselves, and permanent, and alive so long as we refuse to submit to the misguided allure of tattered flesh.

I am convinced, finally, of the presence of my Catholic grandmother’s soul twice. First on the night she died, when I wandered into my parents’ room, still asleep, and wordlessly awoke them a moment before the phone rang to inform them of her death; second in the delivery room, breathing life through our son’s constricted umbilical cord, loosening the knot enough to usher him forward, alive and breathing and crying, as newborns should, ready to take immediately to his mother’s nipple and draw in the first gulps of his first food, her soul feeding his, my soul open and grateful.