

Carolyn Orosz

H36

"But We Hadn't Been Burying the Right Kind of Bones"

And did you know that
under all of that skin,
you are still bleeding?

That each notch of your spine,
the half-moon of your beautiful rounded skull,
has been exposed?

Can't you see
how quickly
you are
coming undone?

How willingly your
skin has started
to unpeel?

There was a field
next to our house.
where wheatgrass grew in large clumps,
and in between--
exposed sections
of shale
that shimmered
blue and
green in the sun.
like patches of ocean,
like puddles gleaming.
blue-green framework,
the only bones that this earth will ever show.

We'd chip off sheets of mica,
using our dirty fingernails
to pry rock away from rock.

There was an old foundation
in the corner of the field.
It was filled with rubble,
broken chairs,
The pink-shingled roof of a dollhouse,
the twisted metal of a child's bed.
There had a fire in the small house.
The family that lived there,

Gone.

Our mother told us not play in the foundation,
that we could get trapped under
layers of concrete and
broken glass.

We didn't listen to her.
We were small enough to fit between the cracks,
to wedge ourselves beneath charred plywood,
wilting doorframes.

We'd search for treasure hidden in the rubble.

You found a book of photographs,
most of them blackened.
Some of them were still whole,
three small girls smiling from under floppy straw sunhats.
Smoke had scarred the memory though,
weaving itself like a shadow across their pretty
little faces,
straight teeth.

We'd take whatever we found through a path in the woods
until we came to a little clearing
with a large maple tree,
a rotting wooden swing hanging from one
spiny, weathered branch.

We'd lay our treasures in the dirt,
the melted hand of a doll,
a rusting doorknob,
fistfuls of black mica.

We'd place them in the hollowed-
out space at the base of the tree,
where one spring
we found
a nest of baby rabbits.

Our eager children's hands
grabbing for their soft fur.
They were so little,
such long velvety ears,
wide eyes,
brown and soft and sad.

Eight of them died.
We didn't know any better.
They were so small,
they were so scared.

I stole my mothers
red handled trowel from
the wicker basket in the garage
and dug eight shallow holes at the base of the tree.
Placed each tiny body into the soft soil.
I let you cover them with dirt,
pat the top of each grave with your little fingers,
pick out eight shiny stones,
one for each small lump in the earth.

Once,
after it had rained for six days straight
we crawled out of the slippery rubble,
With a small plastic terrarium.

There was an inch of dirty sand at the bottom,
a small clay food dish.

It had a purple top with a plastic handle
and a small viewing window.
We poured out the sand at the base of the tree,
a tiny skeleton,
falling to the ground,
bones shattering on impact.

We gathered ribs the length of fingernails,
a skull like a misshapen moon.
I scooped up the bones,
pieces of the tiny salamander,
a pile of bones,
pale and thorny
in my sweaty palms.
Rain running off maple leaves and
onto my soft skin.

I thought of what it had been before,
it's slippery skin,
it's beautiful orange hide,
writhing among the leaves
as a little girl plucked its tiny body

from the moist soil,
put it into her purple terrarium,
her two beautiful sisters
watching,
curiosity curling
their fingers
into tiny fists.
Their beautiful rounded
Skulls,
Their vertebrae,
Their teeth.

Their parents said:
you can keep it
but just for tonight,
the way parents do.

And the purple terrarium sat on
a bedside table, next to a butterfly nightlight
and a storybook about water and
three wrought iron beds.

The youngest girl watched
the salamander as it wriggled in the shadows,
its skin so thin that the light poured into its body,
illuminating its bones,
capillaries lit up like constellations,
its tiny beating heart like a glowing yolk.

They kept the salamander forever,
because for them,
tonight has never ended.
It has been made infinite
by flame.

Maybe if I show up unpeeled
to the clearing in the woods
we would be safe.

It's worth a try I think
as I lace up my boots,
and step out into three
feet of filthy snow.

Because now our skin feels limp.

and I want to give you the only thing
that has ever mattered.
It's too late for me now,
but I'd like you to have your childhood.

You are fourteen years old and
I can't hold you anymore.

You are slippery and writhing,
and I'd like to put you in
my purple terrarium,
watch the light illuminate your bones,
your beautiful rounded skull,
your vertebrae,
your teeth.

We sacrificed
eight baby bunnies,
the earth's blue-green framework,
a collection of memory.

But
we hadn't been burying
the right kind of bones.

It hadn't been enough.
We didn't understand
that it wasn't a fair trade.

That what was killing us couldn't
be buried until it was dead,
that there was no way to kill it.

That's why I have to go back to the
clearing,
to the maple tree with the rotting swing.

I need to hang my bones among the moist leaves,
let rainwater wash over my rotting skin,
eroding memory,
digging trenches between my ribs.

It's the only way
that I can give you what you need.
It's the only way that
I know how to hold you.

H36.

The only way to find the answer to
our suffering:
We'd been searching for it
in all the wrong places.

Please--
I need to keep you,
and longer than "just for tonight"

5

6