

Francine Conley

A NATURAL HISTORY

“Authorities say a man has been arrested overnight for allegedly breaking into Paris’ Museum of Natural History and cutting off a tusk from a centuries-old elephant skeleton with a chainsaw.” March 31, 2013 CBS News

Because it wasn’t enough to let it all decompose—an African elephant: a gift  
from the Portuguese to Sun King  
Louis XIV in 1668; because it lived thirteen years at Versailles a star of the royal  
menagerie, died, and embalmed  
became a skeleton propped in a necropolis of other precious fossils—tusks  
removed and replaced with look-alikes  
to stave off thieves; because three-hundred and forty-five years later a neighbor  
woke from a bad bout of the flu  
in which he hallucinated a blade aimed at the bridge of his nose snapped  
into the silver sound of a real chainsaw  
and parted his curtains to the silhouette of a body inside the dim bone-filled  
museum—red hat, bright white sparks  
like gnats swarming the shadows of his cheekbones; because it was 3 a.m.  
the neighbor dialed the cops  
who held the phone at a distance from their flaccid ears and tried to take his pleas  
to “save the elephant!” seriously—tried  
not to laugh into the receiver as the Chief with chubby fingers waved two cops  
arguing over a chess move in time  
to siren through *rue Buffon* and find the boy still in the act, enthralled; because  
the saw’s high-pitched cry  
drowned their clanging keys and footsteps approaching from behind;  
because of the glinted blade—  
the boy’s white as straightjacket arms gripped and nothing on his mind  
but the purple-orange-white pills  
snug in the pocket of a hawker dawdling the pillars outside Gare du Nord

a few blocks from the squat  
where his pals still lie about where they come from, birth names  
irretrievable as the print on newspapers  
folded beneath their skinny calves; because they wait for him to come *home*;  
because he loves the chainsaw's weight  
and vibration in his hands but the cops' heat shocks in time to toss the tool  
at their feet and bolt through the same window  
he broke into—same squashed evergreen hedge, same dusty gravel paths  
he sped through once paved for *flâneurs*  
to behold fauna and flora in the 1795 Jardin des Plantes zoo where Rilke  
strolled, stopped, studied a Panther  
and wrote: "his vision, from the constantly passing bars has grown so weary  
that it cannot hold anything else;"  
because the boy sees the thousand bars as an opening to a mighty will,  
panther long gone, a grizzly asleep,  
a sloth clinging to a branch—only a gray wolf awake circles his worn path  
in a defunct cage at the zoo's eastern edge;  
because the wolf pauses, lifts his snout and takes in currents carrying  
the boy's sweat—sweet, sour,  
speckled fear—because the zoo hasn't changed since 1871 when Communards  
in one last gasp occupied the zoo  
in hopes France could be reborn into a new nation but unable to stop  
Prussian and French troupes  
ordered soldiers to starve resistors into capitulation; because  
they didn't give up and out of hunger  
ate every zoo animal in sight; because for years after the Bloody Week  
cages stayed empty and the paths  
fell into disrepair though a few passers-by swore beyond the tainted bars  
they saw a cramped panther pacing  
alone; because the boy never learned legends of his own city nor  
of those who fled before him  
he doesn't notice the light flash in the wolf's eyes who stalks his climb up  
the wall near Quai Saint Bernard—  
on the ledge: *to jump or not*—tusk slung over his shoulder, still warm  
from the blade's heat, the alarms bleating  
into a hung, jaundiced sky; *voleur!* its lineage in *escape, wings, thief*;  
because he couldn't stop running

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until now, where he stands, the world catching up to him—cars streaming  
along the *périphérique*—the Seine’s  
mellifluous surface—its dead and drowned reflecting nothing, everything;  
because the boy so entranced by lights  
thinks he’s nothing except what he can do next so he jumps, and though  
he lands on the ground in a lump  
he fractures an ankle, he tries to get up and go on with the heft of a tusk  
on his back but he can’t; no: he can’t walk  
so he collapses and trembles into a memory of waiting for his father  
to return but he never did; because he waited  
and read himself to sleep each night his mother sunk deeper into grief huddled  
beneath a kitchen table sobbing her body  
into a folded heap as she lay next to the sink—apron stained with sauce burning  
to a crisp in the cast iron skillet—  
purple flame lit—faucet open and hot water running; because he left her  
there, never shut off the water,  
the sounds of a city outside the open window becoming a river  
in which he never learned to swim;  
steam fills the room and devours her to vapor: yes: because he thinks his mother  
was unmade of her bones; because  
the cops crowd around him now and ask *who he is* and *what he is doing there*  
and *how did he get a hold of that tusk* set beside him  
like an accident; because he doesn’t know what to say so first says nothing  
the way I say nothing to a childless  
friend who never smelled the rank odor of a boy’s skin after he’s been running  
all day from who knows what enemy real  
or imagined, never smelled fear on a kid like the one sprawled on the sidewalk  
his cuffed hands behind his back—eyes wet,  
gleaming; because she responds to my question “did you hear the wonderful story  
of the elephant tusk?” No:  
*there’s no wonder left in the world; dumbass thought it was ivory*—and as she says this  
I open the door to my son’s bedroom  
his naked body sprawled in white sheets; because he is twenty like the thief  
tipping into manhood I check if he sleeps  
in a locked or panicked position; because he is home after a string of bad luck  
he yells his father’s name  
in nightmares in which I imagine he looks into a long hallway when his father

leaves us worried his son  
would fall into the same pit he did at his age: hording bottles of booze behind  
the same rank pipes pumping  
the same tainted water into the same washer that cleaned his vomit stains  
off our shirts; because my son  
is already known for stealing knick-knacks from any open window, has lied  
about the color of the sky  
and the old woman seated on the park bench so charmed by his question about  
what she sees above didn't notice him pilfer  
the engraved locket from her half-open purse—like he didn't notice  
that she names the wonder  
in the sky's frame she admires *cerulean*, a word he might learn to alternate  
with blue; because I wonder  
how my own son could become so unrecognizable but I suspect his father  
told him the world is nothing:  
you will never amount to anything: you'll be just like the rest; because his father  
told him that too and the story goes on:  
a natural history museum is built to store fossils and bones so we can talk  
about evolution; because I tell my son  
*you owe the world* but don't believe that much is true; because the one sitting  
behind bars never heard about his birth:  
how his mother passed out; how he crowned into the hands of a nurse  
and found nothing, no nipple's liquid gold  
waiting for his lips—though Louis XIV claimed gold his purpose—loved it  
so much he threaded it into costumes  
he was barely able to walk they were so heavy, laden; he even had gold paint  
sprayed over his naked limbs  
before he danced in front of his mother in the gardens in which  
the Mammoth Elephant strolled boredom  
into thirteen years; because some argue Louis suffered from maternal lack  
and expressed it in architectural  
plenitude; because the gilded droplets my son's tongue relished from my nipples  
was not enough, as if seconds into the world  
it was all up to him and not to this mother or the mother of this thief  
who was gone before she saw his face;  
because of this I am awake: it's 3 a.m. in the U.S. and I want to go back  
to the Natural History Museum

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where my childhood began: to those rooms my schoolmates and I scoured  
hand-written signs we read aloud  
to each other, rummaging the ossuary dictionary for Latinate roots—  
*osseus, vena, nervus, cartilaginem;*  
because our ears and eyes took it all in, uniforms soaking skeletal must  
I want to owe nothing to the world  
but wonder, give it back to the one who thought all that was left for him to do  
was hustle a chainsaw  
from Clignancourt's *marché aux puces* and go to the museum he knew he could  
break into, rooms he remembered  
from his childhood full of fossils and tusk, as if he could get away with it,  
forgetting someone is always awake,  
always paying attention, especially when a chainsaw is involved, and it was  
then, only when startled  
by the jangle of a cop's keys and the word *voleur* that the boy woke  
to the world's limits and started running  
to save his life, running fast, then faster, as if nobody is going to catch him.

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