***Names of the Bone***

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I.

Oil-burnng scribe

in the palace

library, aging

scholar of intelligent

stones, I am troubled

again by second-sight

this evening. Once more

I read of Ur’s destruction.

I am familiar with the politics of gods.

And I am weary.

My eyes are hungry

for a darkness

that in Sumerian

sounds like *bread*.

*Let the bread*

*feed my eyes*,

I pray,

snuffing the lamp,

and the night

grows vast

inside me.

In the lap

of knowledge,

ignorant sleep.

II.

In my dreams I walk the world,

colossal Skeleton,

picking through you.

Once you came down from the mountains

a monster full of bones

with my name in your mouth.

But your metacarpal tips

were delicate as a prayer

balanced on a fountain of breath.

What hives in the stubborn

smoke of our idioms? Sculpture

of air. Scripture of *Ruach. Rauch.*

III.

Clairvoyant antiquary,

grasp how living bones

are connected to dead—

how bone

connects

the living and the dead.

German *knochen*, gnarled as a Grünewald.

Greek *osteon*, Parian marble, cool to the touch.

Connected.

Polynesian *iwi*, light as the honeycreeper.

The Crow nation’s jubilant *hu-re*:

Connected.

*Asthi*, Sanskrit sandscript.

*KRS* of the tomb-treasure, Pharaoh’s curse:

Connected.

Hebrew *etzem*, Assyrian *etsemtu*,

wind-sanded desert bones.

Connected.

O vocative mouth

with your gusts of meaning

consonant-connected!

Who coupled you to

the galaxy scatter,

the distance

between things

always-increasing

ever and ever, amen?

IV.

Drums and flutes,

atavist

orchestra building

a temporary shrine

sacred to breathing:

Listen.

Stag thigh.

Red-crowned crane bone.

Eagle ulna.

Who pierced these nostrils

into a man’s tibia?

I puzzle at the whistling

wraith of a tune

haunted by breath

that woke it from its sleep.

Nepalese flute, half painted red,

dipped in Lust, Anger,

Illusion like a hand blood-dyed.

The other half, a blank

no-color,

Nirvana. I puzzle

how charisma escapes

through such simple perforations.

What haunts it alive?

Is it the terror

of nights my bones remember,

quiver of nostrils, lips?

Cave-mouth issuing

lamentation smoke.

Smoke-breath tunneling

through the tibia

excavating echoes,

prolonging the cavernous echoes.

Who painted

those bison startled

into colors on the wall?

Flame-leaping

shadows dancing,

omens of the spear’s luck!

In my bones

I remember.

My bones remember.

V.

A maze of tunnels leads you,

paleo-pilgrim, down to the cave’s womb:

under-temple of the world.

There, fire-light ignites into life

the Sorcerer of the Hunt:

the Animal-Human God!

VI.

When the buffalo trampled me

to pieces in the mud, you found

one particle of bone,

belovèd daughter!

And from that bone

you stitcheds me back to life.

We must dance the dance they taught us

so they, too, may live again.

We must remember the animals.

VII.

When my ancestors tore me apart

and separated my bones

and counted them,

they found one too many:

that was when I knew

I was a Shaman.

VIII.

And I awoke embattled

on all sides

by hopes and fears

passing from hunger

to hunger

and heat to cold

in this vibrant

torment of a world

where you tossed my bones

like thinking dice,

O novice-god,

child-god

of Heraclitus,

how recklessly

you wagered me!

IX.

The elephant mother’s trunk

stretches over

the corpse of her child

like a crosier.

How patiently she fails

to coax it to live!

The angels gasp

how she flexes

the helpless muscle of Religion—

Love’s anger

scaring

flies.

X.

My soul, my sacred whore,

you have worshipped every god

that ever was! And none was true.

XI.

I wrote a twelfth tablet

for Gilgamesh.

The Great Cycle.

This was to be the happy ending:

Enkidu returns from the world below.

But the word I wrote means wraith.

Not Enkidu: white smoke of him.

The is in *he is not.*

I study this pale ontology.

XII.

Last night I could not remember

the Sumerian name for bone.

This morning I unearthed

from under the ruins of a ziggurat

buried in my dreams:

*ĝiri-pad-ra*.

XIII.

When Ghost and Bone break

apart like a wish

they go their separate ways.

Ghost grows ghostlier,

Bone more solid,

more and more a stone.

Ghost glides through a world

where the trees are only

what the trees can remember

and the world’s carbon structures

recede into frailer versions

of themselves.

Enkidu in Hell

cannot break

a twig.

The twig

cannot

break.

XIV.

Winter came

and skeletonised

my breath.

Winter came

and etched on windowpanes

crystals oracular and frail.

A scrimshaw

scripture

gave me my winter names.

*Calvarium*. Calvary-crucifix.

*Sacrum*. Sacred osteospicium.

*Metartarsal*. Paul of Tarsus.

Calvarium. Sacrum.

Metatarsal.

Rigid fragilities

written in frost

foretell me

like the stars.

XV. In the Valley of Dry Bones

What shall we do, Lord?

You made us strangers.

We walk into a world that does not know us.

We no longer know ourselves, we are shreds

from a torn net, strewn by the winds,

exiled from everything but Parable.

XVI.

I have heard

the bones of my walking

crack in the jackal’s jaws.

I have seen

the bones of my hearing

scattered in the dust.

XVII.

My soul is a graveyard:

it hurts to hoard the wealth of the dead.

Empty its pockets, Allah the Merciful!

My soul is a seedless Garden,

merciful Allah:

plant the bones of Resurrection there!

XVIII.

When I am in the mosque

I see a desert.

In the desert I see a mosque.

In the lines of the sacred verses

I see dry bones.

Between the lines of the sacred verses:

an oasis where the dead

can moisten their lips

and breathe again.

XIX.

When I read *Shabbat*

I hear *Shabatu*—

for out of Ur came Abraham.

When I read *Joḥanan* יוֹחָנָן

I can still taste

the sweet waters of Oannes.

XX.

You name us

in your bones, Lord,

and we stand up and walk.

You lose count

because our numbers

are as the sands on the shores of the seas.

Are we not what you promised Noah,

the curse

of your blessing?

You will forget our names

and this is why

we will cease to be.

XXI.

Scribe, carve a name

into the thing

you came from:

it is waiting for you.

Write: *clay*.

*Adam*, say the Hebrews.

*What is the name for these names?*

*Shamai etzem*.

The two-hundred-and-six Names of the Bone.

Name-of-the-Father,

tinder-bush bursting

red in the night.

Tent of the Tabernacle

stretched

across a parchment sky.

Flesh of the scapegoat,

tattooed

with totem and taboo.

Flesh of the calf

branded with

prophet scribble, burning.

Skin of the Crucified

weeping

the Blood of the Lamb.

Name transgressed

in speaking,

name I must not say:

Breathe vowels

into my syllabary bones,

waken the ox and the house.

Breathe the world

and the clouds

that pasture over it.

Send a breeze

through the bonehouse.

How I miss the smell of rain!

But why did you breathe

breath so moist and exhaustible

into the nostrils of the woman and the man?

XXII.

Tree of Life that dies inside me,

Tree of Death

that survives me:

Grant me *etzem*, essence

of substance of self.

Stiffen the tree of my spine.

*Shamai etzem.*

*Schlomo.*

*Shalom.*

XXIII.

My dear mother, my dear father,

where did you go

with your strength and kindness?

How I miss your kindness!

How I need your strength!

I will look for you under the willow tree, by the river.

XXIV.

Lightness is in me.

Emptiness at my centre,

you are what I am.

The Buddha

in the middle

where nothing stands

sees into the hollow

of my marrow

and out into the open.

Purity of Seeing

blesses

space.

XXV.

*Carry your bones around with you*

*to the place*

*where you lay them down.*

XXVI.

O Enlightened:

the air I breathe

came to me

from that far-away shrine

where it rippled

the flames

of a thousand candles

burning in remembrance

of the One Who Came and Went.

Wind moved over the pasture

into the forest,

surprising the leaves.

Listen!

Listen.

Emptiness breathes me.

XXVII.

I carry my bones inside me,

guardian

of my relics.

I carry my ashes

in my mouth,

O Tongue of Fire!

In me the sun and moon

grow weary

of their rounds.

My bones are heavy

and my mouth is dry.

Where shall I rest?

Earth

opened a pore for me

in its darkness.

Earth

healed over

and survived me.

XXVIII.

The bones of the living

burn

on the altar,

Lord—

like torches

at the bottom of a mine.

Like lamps in the windows

of a house that waits in the dark,

Lord, our living bones are burning.

Far into the night

they burn

and are burning, Lord.

What do you know?

You move in the shadows

over the face of the deep,

powerful and perplexed

over the faces of the dead, weeping

over the sacred litter of the dead.

Last night

you stood at the shrine

you had built in our image.

You reached out your hands.

You cupped your palms together

and made a valley of shadow.

Bone-fires flared

in the darkness you had made.

A firefly glow bled

between your fingers and you reached out your hands

and offered us to ourselves

like a sacrifice.

