

FOSSILS

By Nancy Moir

WHY WE LIKE IT: *'Fossils' are both subject and symbol in this beautifully written story where a feisty paleontologist grandmother and an absentee artist father become the positive and negative charges in a young boy's 'coming of age'. Details of setting take hold in the mind: the inhospitable African desert that conceals priceless treasures beneath its depths and the unlikely 'resurrection' of a lovable dinosaur named Seymour. The author's style is deceptively simple: writing of this caliber only comes with talent and hard work. Quote: Alongside her grave, a bone pointed out angrily, laughing at me. I had no energy to kick it away. The sun was too hot. The rock was quiet. I laid my ear against it but heard only my own grief. And, The warehouse was bright and air-conditioned. I caught my face in its shiny surfaces and glimpsed a scarecrow. Economical linear story telling that yields an abundance of psychological and literary intricacies.*

“There,” she said, pointing at the rock. I followed her fingers, but saw nothing beyond the slight variations in the stone, and the shadows of her hand, her brush, her chisel. Grandma was in her seventies, and though her skin was spotted and wrinkled, and her joints often creaked, she still had the eyes of a hawk. “That could be something,” she said, handing her tools off to me behind her back. “Carefully,” she warned, before setting herself back down on the rock, knees cracking as she fell into its embrace.

Father was an artist, and Mother was dead, so I lived with Grandma in the summers, which, in her occupation, was most of the year. I arrived in April, pale and lithe, and sprawled myself onto the sand like a starfish, too weak to bear my weight upon my elbows for long stretches. By May, the sun had basted and burned my skin and the work had built muscle beneath its slackness. When I arrived home in November, acquaintances would ask my father if I was adopted. It was true that we looked like we were of different ethnicities. He had not aged, but I had grown up and grown old.

As intense as the sun was alongside her, those green landscapes of home, which I rarely saw, were blinding to a child starved of colour. I lived in a sepia world, spending most of my days laid out on the rock beside her, narrowed into her shadow to shield myself from the sun, but mostly, to be close to her.

Grandma tutored me as she shaved stone from the creatures bound within it. The wind was punctuated by proclamations of “Aha, Samuel!” when I was correct and long silences when I was wrong, as she waited for me to think and compute new answers. When I was 15, I begged

my father to let me stay, and he gave in, much more quickly than I thought he would. A formal education would have been a disservice to all of us. She needed to purge her knowledge; I needed to know everything; Father needed his space.

At lunch, I often travelled with her to the nearest village. She drove like a maniac, which was quite a contrast to the way she worked (“Not so rough, Samuel! Those fossils have been there for millennia. Don’t break them to save an hour or day!”). She dodged cars, camels, horses, and pedestrians, waving to each, regardless as to whether they were capable of responding. I laughed as she clutched the steering wheel, and her face split into a smile as wide as the sky.

She selected individual fruits and vegetables from the stands, bartering with a smile. “At home in America,” she once told me, “I don’t like going to the grocer. They look at me and see an old woman. Do you think I’m old?” she’d ask, then answer her own question with a gesture. “Those bones are old,” she’d say, jostling the dice, carved from mammoth bones, which she kept in her pocket. “Not these.” She’d flex her muscles like a bodybuilder and we’d laugh.

I asked her once why she became a paleontologist; it seemed like such a tedious job. She lined her tools up one-by-one, like a dentist. The sky was overcast, so I could see her clearly—the smattering of freckles that merged across her nose, and her lake-green eyes. “When I was a little girl, I read stories about dragons—ancient stories, from before we’d begun to properly reassemble the past. I got the sense that maybe dinosaurs had roamed amongst our ancestors. I know now that’s not true,” she said, holding up a hand to stop me before I interjected, “But their bones did, the bones were there. Imagine discovering part of a dinosaur skeleton in the sand, it having risen to the top as the wind shifted the dunes? Or finding a preserved mammoth in a bog. Now imagine you were an ancient people, and you came across such a thing? You would believe in dragons, wouldn’t you? Monsters? This isn’t just prehistory we’re digging,” she said, gesturing to me where I lay chipping at my small section. “It’s the origin of art. Or at least that’s the way I see it.”

“Lie down,” she said, “And press your head against the rock. Close your eyes. Listen.”

I did as she instructed. The rockface was warm, and its texture varied. It smelled of dust and earth and salt. I inhaled it deeply, to make it part of me. I heard a low whistle, like the sound of the ocean imagined from the edge of a seashell, the hum of the earth as a living organism. I looked up to her, and she smiled, then returned to her work, probing with a small pick, brushing the dust lovingly back into the atmosphere from whence it once came.

She spent so much time with her dinosaurs that she gave them names. The specimen we worked on had first been discovered as a fragment of femur; hence he became Seymour the femur. “Seymour,” she would say, “You are a most beautiful puzzle.” “Aha, Seymour, you’ve been keeping secrets!” and, reverently, she hummed to him, blew dust from his grave, and imagined aloud what his life would have been like. He was a sauropod, his genus as yet unidentified. Each time she uncovered one of his fragments, she made a clucking sound with her tongue, and I imagined his neck ratcheting up further in the sky, piercing the clouds we begged for, for respite from the heat.

Seymour's death was also a puzzle. After he died, his pieces had shattered and folded into lava. At first, I saw no bones in the rock, then I saw nothing but them. "That's how you know you have what you need to be a paleontologist," she told me, "When you sleep, the pieces move in your mind and snap into place." No need for sheep or counting. No need for restless nights when you were always bone-weary.

I was helping her with Seymour when she suddenly placed her hand on her heart and thudded onto the rock, her tools skittering down into the pit. Help was there before I'd broken the crust in my throat to cry out.

But it was too late. Her heart had given out; she died on the rock as passionately as she had lived upon it. The wind swept in and drew her hair across her cheek as I hovered over her, shielding her from the sun as she had always done for me.

I wired Father to let him know, but he didn't reply right away. He maintained a small apartment through which he conducted his business, but he was always flitting around, peddling his art to dealers and museums. Grandma's colleagues were family to me. They didn't skip a beat in my care. I was 16 by then, wiry and independent but still soft in the middle, softer now without her to shield me. They took turns trying to console me, and ensured that I didn't neglect my studies. I returned each morning to Seymour, to the place where she'd fallen. Alongside her grave, a bone pointed out angrily, laughing at me. I had no energy to kick it away. The sun was too hot. The rock was quiet. I laid my ear against it but heard only my own grief.

Father finally called, in the middle of the night. He said, "It's up to you where you want to live." His voice crackled over the line. He had answered it as my father, but truthfully, that voice could have belonged to any stranger.

"I'm staying," I said.

"Take care," he said, and hung up.

Elephant gestation lasts 22 months, but Seymour's rebirth took years. Sometimes I imagined him inside of the rock, yoked by lava, sediment, stone. I understood why Grandma spoke to him. Maybe she was a little bit crazy, or maybe I wasn't crazy enough.

Void of Grandma, the landscape lost its lustre. Her voice, I realized, had carried me for those years, that and her gentle touch. My stale textbooks coaxed me to sleep at night; I fought to stay awake and learn. Seymour became tedious. Occasionally my hand slipped and I scored his dark bones with my tools. In my head, she berated me, not softly, but angrily. I realized he was all that I had of her. I wept for her and him. I was gentle again.

Finally, her replacement, Louis, declared that we had removed all of Seymour's bones from the site. For the first time in many months, I stood back, feeling my vertebrae snap into place, and could see nothing but stone. We all hugged each other, but the victory felt empty.

I packed my bags, and followed Seymour to the warehouse, watching as he was packed into crates and prepared to be shipped to America, where he didn't belong. I didn't belong there either. The warehouse was bright and air-conditioned. I caught my face in its shiny surfaces and glimpsed a scarecrow. I had spent most of my life in foreign countries and sandscapes. Cities were migraines. But I wired Father and then followed Seymour across the ocean.

The ocean was the near opposite of the desert, but in many ways it was the same. The dunes moved more swiftly. The massive sea creatures were elusive, still throbbing with life. It was inhospitable to humans unless you had a vessel and provisions. I lay on the decks and languished, using my hands to shield my eyes from the blinding reflection of sun on water. "Seymour," I asked, "Did you float across the oceans when you were alive?" I knew the answer, of course. He was probably terrestrial. I saw his shattered mandible in my mind's eye. He was laughing at me.

We arrived in America in September, as the leaves were turning gold. I followed Seymour to the museum, where I easily got a job while I finalized my studies. I was lauded as my grandmother's replacement, a prodigy by proxy. Grief adds unnecessary fame. We were all in this together, the paleontologists, the locals she had hired, even the dogs who lounged on the periphery of our work area, guarding us. At the museum, I managed to hide in the background. I worked long days and commuted at night, when the city was less abrasive, gray scales and bright light.

I found myself falling into small cafes, looking for the similarities to those we frequented by the dig site, into which we'd arrive spent and sanded and dry. But the only thing familiar was their size. I visited other museums, looking for history that was not my own—which had been split across families and continents—but I remained lost.

I called Father. He too was in the city, another moored ship. I met him in one of those little cafes, where he was arranging to show his paintings. He had two of them with him, one beneath each elbow. I remembered holding him by the elbows when they were the highest point on him that I could reach.

I was glad that he had his paintings, because otherwise I wasn't sure if I would recognize him, or he me. His hair had greyed but otherwise he was unchanged, and I was looking for someone older. I was probably older than what he expected. The elements have a way of doing that to you. Spend time with too many dinosaurs, Grandma would say, and you start to look like one. I half-smiled in recollection and he took this as a gesture and smiled at me.

We sat at a table, across from each other. His paintings faced each other in the other set of opposing chairs. "Sammy," he said, "It's been—"

"Five years," I said.

He ordered us drinks, so we would have something to hold. I spun my straw in the tumbler, and he watched the ice. I felt his eyes on my face like the sand, hitting the high points—cheeks, nose, mouth, then eyes. I averted my gaze to the walls, to the gaudy paintings his work would be

replacing. I lifted his from their seats and set them on the table. It was my turn to look at him, and I wasn't sure what I saw. Maybe pride, maybe shame.

"How are you?" I asked.

He nudged his paintings, unintentionally or accidentally, I wasn't sure. He shook his head. "My art is getting more exposure."

I nodded. "Mine too."

He looked at me questioningly, then softened. "The dinosaur? I read about it in the paper." He took a deep breath, his chest rising as it filled with air. His loneliness hit me like a concussion. I explained about the dinosaur, and as my words rattled on in and outside of my head, I felt like I was on the ocean again, struggling to breathe in the rich, wet air. I did not belong there, nor did Seymour.

Father and I hugged each other gently, as the strangers that we were, then slipped out of the din and onto the street, not looking back for each other, waving into the darkness.

I stayed for Seymour's grand opening. He was propped up on his haunches, his head raised and mouth wide, showing his grin to an endless parade of customers. He was built on educated conjecture—cement holding together the pieces that had survived across time. Despite his size

and pose, he'd been an herbivore. What would we think of dinosaurs if they were staged tumbling joyously? Would it change humanity to know we'd not been preceded by savages? I listened to children exclaim about Seymour's size and ferocity; I searched within them for glimpses of Grandma's contemplative serenity.

That night, after the visitors had been shuttered out, and only the lab workers and security guards remained, I removed one of the bones of Seymour's toes, and replaced it with a facsimile. He looked no different. The important work had already taken place in the lab, where scientists scanned the fossils, analyzed them, categorized them. The skeleton was just for show, to draw in visitors who would finance the grunt work.

In my small rented room, I repacked my personal items, which I'd let drift across the table. I slept my last night on the air mattress, then let out its stale, city air. I considered advising Father that I was leaving, but it might hurt if I let myself probe for a reaction that I was certain wouldn't happen. He wouldn't miss me. I hadn't missed him.

I took the boat back to Africa, Seymour's bone jostling in a pocket at my hip. An acquaintance met me at the shore. "You look sick," he said, "Pale!" I smiled and clapped him on the back; we chatted loosely as he drove me back to the village near Seymour's resting place. I slept a night on a cot, then started a long walk across the desert, into the swathes of stone that we had unburied. Seymour's vessel was filled with sand. Our tracts, and tracks, were gone.

It was there that I stopped and unburdened myself of my pack. I took a measured sip of water, then pulled from my pack the urn that carried Grandma's ashes. As I removed the stopper, the wind took hold of her ashes and scattered them into the sky. I knelt, knees cracking, and dug

through the sand until I found stone, then returned Seymour's bone to his grave. I knew she would want this; she never told me, but I always listened through the lines.

As my eyes fell to the ground, I suddenly recognized my father's work. The strange clumps of colour made no sense in the café; no wonder he'd struggled so. He'd brightened the earthy tones, trying to manifest joy, instead of painting the rock and sand and sky as they were. I guess he couldn't see it through her eyes. It had been toil for him, but she made it joy for me.

"I'm sorry, Dad," I said.

About a half a mile back to the village, I glanced upon the ground and could see nothing but bone. I removed the tools from my pocket and began to dig.

In the morning, I called Louis in America, and told him that Seymour had a friend. I had begun to coax his metacarpal out from the rock. "Carl," I said, "Is waiting for you." I felt his smile through the static.

My hand lingered on the phone. I'm not sure why, but I rang my Father. He answered right away.

When he said I could stay with Grandma, I had imagined him clutching his paintings, which were strung together like a kite, and simply flying away. But now, in death, she'd suddenly pulled him back to earth, tied us back together.

"It's me, Sammy," I said.

"I knew you'd be calling."

I didn't ask him how he knew. I told him where I was, and about the dinosaur, Carl. Then I paused to catch a breath. "I saw your paintings in the rock," I said, "You never told me that you visited Grandma when she worked."

He paused. I heard cars passing in his background. Mine was filled with wind and sky. The birds were silent in the heat.

"I don't know what you mean," he said.

"Your paintings, the ones you had at the café. Aren't they inspired by the landscapes here, that you shared with Grandma?"

I heard the cord twisting over the line; I imagined his face in his hands, muffling his voice. “I was in university when she travelled to Niger,” he said, “I never visited her. Didn’t she tell you that?”

“I guess she did. I just can’t make sense of this.”

“Of what?”

“Your paintings. The bones and rock and sand, the skies, I see them in your paintings. You’ve just transformed them, but they’re there. The bones are there.” I laughed awkwardly.

“I see.” He paused; I heard him twisting the cord around his thumbs. “She described her work in great detail to anyone who asked. Even those who didn’t. She had a theory about art and bones-“

“Yes, I know,” I said.

“Come,” I said, “Please come visit me. I’ll show you.”

“Alright,” he said, “I will. Next month.”

When his plane landed, I smiled at him, and his arms settled around my back. I took his bags, which were heavy with paints and canvases, a camera, a few clothes. I drove him out to the site right away. We spoke little. His eyes were scanning the horizon, his camera jostling, unused, on his lap.

I didn’t tell him that we stopped at the site where I cast Grandma’s ashes into the wind. I think he knew. “By God, Samuel, you’re right.” He looked at me, and I felt exposed.

He stayed on with me another month, then through the winter, then for another year. As I and the other paleontologists brushed dust from the stone, he stood beside us, brushing paint and dust onto his canvases, which shaded us from the scorching sun.

AUTHOR’S NOTE: “Fossils” *started with an image, as many of my stories do. In this case, it was a rock. A friend and I had been discussing petrification, which led me to think of fossils, and how “fossil” is used as an insult, to identify someone who is considered obsolete. I saw the aged paleontologist unearthing dinosaur bones; a fossil pursuing fossils. Despite her age, she is not old; all that her grandson sees is her vibrancy.*

I have read about the purported backstories of mythical creatures such as unicorns and sea creatures, and wondered if fossils played a role in their emergence. That connection manifested in the protagonist’s father’s art. I wanted to tie science and art together in a peaceful way.

I draw much of my inspiration from being out in the natural world. I see writing as painting with words; I feel words as colour, sound, texture, heart. I enjoy reading anything that captures my senses and makes me mourn the last page.

BIO: *Nancy Moir lives between cornfields on the edge of Ottawa, Ontario, with her husband and five cats. When she was young and idealistic, she dreamed of being a novelist, but technical writing was a better provider, so she and creative writing broke up for awhile. Recently, a fellow writing friend encouraged her to start again, and it has been love ever since. Her first published story was featured in the 27 Stories: The Winter 2018 Owl Canyon Press Hackathon Contest Winners anthology. Her second published story, "Godomatic," will appear in an upcoming issue of Flash Fiction Online. She is currently working on a novel. When she is not writing, she can be found riding a bicycle around the countryside or happily weeding one of her many vegetable gardens.*