overarching idea, not to say "invention." What astonishes and amazes me is the art with which the vertebrae are "lit"?

Brassaï: I knew you liked skeletons! I've studied them; I've had fun taking them apart and

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nature always worked things out so that it could create the whole body from that single "idea," deforming, metamorphosing these vertebrae according to need. The whole skull is composed of vertebrae that fit into one another like a construction set, but vertebrae that are so transfigured that it took a poet's eye to recognize and identify them.

Picasso: What poet was that?

Brassaï: Goethe. He was the first to find and describe cranial vertebrae. And it was the skull of a sheep he picked up in a cemetery that put him on the trail.

The question interests Picasso passionately. Then I make a sketch of a vertebrate: a long column with two hollow cylinders, one for the spinal cord and brain; the other for all the organs to be protected. Three sets of members are attached to this column so that it can transport . . .

Picasso: I can see the arms and legs, but where do you come up with the third member?

Brassaï: It's the mandible, the lower jaw. Like the members, it's not part of the column, it's attached to it. It's articulated at its joints, just like arms and legs, but arms and legs that have been anklylosed at each end and knelt together, the arm and hand joined. In fact, in birds, the lower jaw bands at its "elbow." The mandible of snakes also bands, with the additional peculiarity that the two ends are not jointed together, but simply linked by a very elastic tissue. That, in fact, is why snakes can swallow animals whole, even enormous ones.

We talk at length about bones and the skeleton. Picasso is astonished that mammals consistently have seven cervical vertebrae.

Brassaï: It's as if nature purposely tied its own hands in order to find along with seven vertebrae, no more. As if invention was somehow dependent on impediments. To make the giraffe's neck, it had to elongate them to an extraordinary degree—hence the stiff, inflexible neck—or, conversely, for the dolphins, which has practically no neck, to reduce them to thin, barely visible laminae. From the five fingers, nature may make a man's hand, a horse's hoof, a dog's paw, or those long umbrella ribs that form the armature of the bat's wings. You are often criticized for your daring, Picasso, your deformations, but people should see what nature dares do in this respect with a single "motif"! To better understand your art, they should go not to art museums but to the museum of natural history!

I am left alone with the six little bronzes Picasso has taken out of the "museum." Since I do not find a single section of bare wall in the cluttered studio to serve as a backdrop, I resolve to set up a board. And I need a few thumbtacks. I ask Marcel for some. But the strange thing is that, in this crucible of art where canvases come and go by the dozens, paintbrushes and tubes of paint by the hundreds, there is not a single available thumbtack. Marcel goes to a great deal of trouble to dig some up and pulls out a few for me with his notched penknife. When Picasso joins me a little later, his eyes immediately fall on these six sorry thumbtacks.

Picasso: But those are my thumbtacks.

Brassaï: Yes, they're your thumbtacks.

Picasso: Okay, I'm taking them back.

Brassaï: Don't take them! I need some for my backdrop.

Picasso: Good, keep them. I'll leave them here. But you have to give them back to me. They're my thumbtacks.

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