A graveyard. Evening, the sun sets. Two people walk through the graveyard. They speak while walking.

Person 1

In forensic examinations of human remains, the primary question we ask of bones is: "What happened? How did you die?"

Person 2

Don't you look at a bone and wonder: "Who are you?"

Person 1

Yes, that is the question we ask to identify the remains. In this case, we reconstruct the effects of a life as it was fossilized into the morphology and texture of bones. When we see bones in the laboratory, they are dead. But in the living body, the bone is a very dynamic tissue, and responsive to life.

Person 2

It seems that the bones of a skeleton are exposed to life in a similar way that photographic film is exposed to light. A life, understood as a set of exposures to a myriad of forces, like labor, location and violence, is projecting onto a mutating and contracting negative. That is the body in life.

Person 1

And in so far as photography is a form of light writing, forensic osteology is a form of life reading.

Person 2

How do you read the life of bones?

Person 1

Bones don't speak for themselves, so there is a need for translation between the language of things and that of humans. In the period coinciding with the forensic investigation and identification of Josef Mengele's remains, scientists began to appear in human rights cases as expert witnesses, called to speak on behalf of bones - interpreters of the dead.

Person 2

The use of things as witnesses reminds me of what scholars of poetry and persuasion call prosopopoeia, the attribution of a voice to something inanimate or dead.

Person 1

This is a recurring trope often found in writing on forensic anthropology, beautifully put by a pioneer of human rights forensics: "I'm not an advocate, I'm an expert. Unless you maintain objectivity, you lose credibility and the best way is to let the bones speak for themselves."

They walk past a gravedigger who digs out a grave, with hoes and shovels. They watch the gravedigger throw bones out of the grave and out onto the earth for some time.

Person 1

Excuse me, whose grave is this?

Gravedigger throws up the skull, Person 1 picks it up from the ground and looks at it.

Person 1

His?

Gravedigger

Yeah. To be is also to be a bone.

Person 1 and Person 2 keep walking and take a wrong turn. It is getting dark now, only a few lights lead the way.

Gravedigger

(singing in the distance)
A pickaxe and a spade, a spade,
For and a shrouding-sheet
O a pit of clay for to be made
For such a guest is met.

Person 2

I have always liked how the bone is an object from which the trace of the subject cannot be fully removed. No longer a living human, not simply an object. When I came across an image of a human skeleton, I was astonished to see how, spread out on a table, it far exceeded the size of a human body. And I was shocked to learn that something once born and kept together as a unity, an essence maybe, was so easily disassembled and put together again. From then on, living bodies seemed little more than a collage of parts soon to be un- done by death and decomposition.

Person 1

Maybe there's something about identity in that.

Person 2

Yeah, but unlike other parts of the body, bones feel very distant, outside of myself. Bones tend to go by un- noticed, under the radar of daily life. Covered by flesh and skin, awaiting the end of their host's life to finally reveal themselves.

Person 1

In the undamaged body, you can neither see nor sense them.

Person 2

Well, not entirely. Once, in an experiential anatomy dancing class, I could feel every bone in my hand become a cathedral that I could enter and walk through. Yes! My bones were a cathedral and I could traipse the apse and naves of my own hand! I went inside my wrists and other places where there were no myriad forces I was exposed to, no rent. I could lose myself inside myself.

They take another wrong turn.

Person 1

Losing yourself is not so strange, but what is strange is the idea of an architecture designed to lose yourself. Like the labyrinth in "The Garden of Forking Paths". Ts'ui Pên, the great-grandfather of Borges' protagonist, renounced his power in order to write a novel and construct a labyrinth in which all men would become lost. Thirteen years he dedicated to these tasks, but he was murdered and his novel was incoherent and no one found the labyrinth.

Person 2

(as though lost in thought) Except, in the sprawling veins of my labyrinth there was, at the very center - a graveyard. And at the centre of that, a workshop, and in the center of that, a stonemason. He was folded over himself, chisel and mallet in hand, working on a large pile of headstones. The very ones here in the graveyard. Clumsy slabs that pinned bodies to their identities. Translations, so to speak. He carved out the same death poem on all of them.

They keep taking wrong turns.

Person 1

Last night, I dreamt of a labyrinth, actually: in the center was a water jar; my hands almost touched it, my eyes could see it, but so tight and winding and intricate were the curves that I knew I would die before reaching it.

Person 2

But you didn't die. (Pauses, but keeps walking in the wrong direction.) You can't get rid of this survival mechanism, and as humans it's a lot more complex, because we are aware of our death and our survival instincts, so we get confused and we try to have architectures and fetishes that play with the idea of not

surviving. But in the end, we still feel this survivalist gene, in every molecule of our bodies. You cannot decide if you breathe or not, the body is assigned to live, not to die. We could be mistaken to think that consciousness gets in the way of nature, by way of confusing or tricking oneself to see it as an artificial entity. ***They turn wrong one last time, maybe the lights turn off. Their perspective is closing down, like growing old.***

Person 1

(singing)
A pickaxe and a spade, a spade,
For and a shrouding-sheet
O a pit of clay for to be made
For such a guest is met.

text by Sophia Rohwetter