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Abstract

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Cover Page Footnote

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Extinction Events Proposed by My Father

Fiction by Liz Breazeale

1. The dinosaurs gas themselves to death. The emissions of hundred-ton creatures create a hothouse, a planet heavy and toxic.

My father, a man who ran out his life with searching for the cause of the dinosaurs' annihilation, proposed this theory around the time of my birth: that they, through their very existence, their bodily functions, eliminated themselves. It was the first of many such theories for which he became known, and it followed me my entire life.

I read his *Journal of Paleontology* article repeatedly in my childhood, wanting to understand extinctions, as I then thought he did; he kept it in his study his whole life, until throwing it out upon my discovery of the Chicxulub crater many years later. He would pull it out often, his first publication, the start of something that ached and ached his whole life. I took it with me as he shuffled me to my grandparents' home, snuggled in my bag against the stuffed mammoths I was told my mother had given me at birth; my father would look on them in a mixture of disgust and longing, muttering something about survival.

I wondered whether he knew how the thick pages got to be crinkled, torn, whether he assumed it was from his own rereading.

My grandparents discovered me night after night, tracing the words, memorizing them under a flashlight. In these moments, cavered under sheets, I imagined myself under the earth, excavating the answers my father searched for.

I never told him of this. I think, perhaps, he might have been surprised.

2. The dinosaurs suffer from a diminution of sexual activity and find themselves with no desire to procreate, or parent their already existing offspring.

My father left me with my maternal grandparents, people who existed behind a veil of decrepitude, for much of my childhood, when he traveled on digs in foreign countries. They were Catholic, and would go to Mass every Sunday. I slipped into the confessional and said nothing, only *forgive me, Father, I do not want to be here.*

I only wished to worship with my own father, who prayed to the earth, desperate and thinning, his theories becoming prayers. The hacking of his pick and the swish of his brush and the sifting of sediment, catechisms.

I desired, rather than let the decay of age doom my world, to excavate it. Loop it through my fingers like the rosaries my grandparents held every night when they forced me to kneel and ask forgiveness. Forgiveness, they told me, for the lack of faith I showed in yearning to follow my father's path.

You and your mother, they said, palming her photograph as though running their fingers through her hair, whisking their voices over her memory as though they could feel her still. You and your mother, faithless. We told her, too: You will only find answers in God. You will not find answers in the earth.

I did not understand how they could perceive me as faithless; I had faith, though I could not yet articulate its manner. Faith in destructions, faith in endings, faith in searching for preserved breaths of the dead.

I never spoke to my father about this when he was home; he inhabited his study like the remains of some creature left behind by flood or eruption, covered by layers of decay. I pretended to relish the silence, read through his bookshelves, mimicking him as he sat behind his desk or on the couch, hands folded over his forehead, lips never moving.

I asked him questions and questions, in avalanches, in floods. Rather than tell me to stop reading and go play in the yard, he gave exhausted answers, ones I could not interpret or define, that emptied themselves into the air, reluctant.

What is the Permian, I asked. So general, at first. What is a sediment?

Then, as my interest increased, my questions narrowed, and his voice landed somewhere between frustration and amusement.

What did the dinosaurs sound like when they breathed? How long does an extinction take?

He replied, the breaths of dinosaurs sounded like echoes off the wall of a cave.

Some say an extinction takes all of time.

3. The dinosaurs are victims of widespread mammalian conspiracies, involving the eating of eggs and resources necessary for survival.

My father returned periodically, and the house eroded with each word we spoke; the erosions came hard and fast, ice cracks with each time I asked about my mother, wind and water when I asked to join him on his next trip to India or Australia or Ethiopia.

She had ghosts of cheekbones, my father told me once. The skin stretched so thin it was as though it was never there. Her lips, rims of craters. She created stark boundaries—before and after meeting her—in people because she was like implosions and destructions in her bones, in her voice.

He would tell me these things, sometimes without my asking. As though he could ascribe some shape of her to my own, pillow my body with hers. He told me once how she did not sing to me in the womb, but read her work to me as she would write.

He said, I always knew when she was happy with the work she'd done in a day, when it was good, because I came home and she said she felt you kick at this phrase, at this word, at this idea. I asked to read it, to hear it, too, but she always laughed, her laugh that was like regrowth, like evolution, and she would tell me that her daughter was already a much better critic than I.

It was after this conversation that my father agreed to take me with him, on the condition that I learn more than I could from books.

When he told my grandparents, they said he was crazy to do this. A girl needs stability, they said. How young she is, how like her parents.

But he laughed, his guffaw that was like the earth's hollowness after eruptions, told them how foolish they were, that his daughter was almost thirteen.

She's ten, they argued.

He registered no surprise except to say, well thank goodness. Her lack of publications will be acceptable.

This was the one joke I ever heard my father make.

4. The dinosaurs suffer from racial senility. Reaching an evolutionary dead end, their genetic novelty desiccates, and their species becomes old and decrepit and inadaptably.

My father had a partner on his digs. A woman, with whom I shared a tent. She was the only woman on any expedition, and her hands were as rough as the men's, but she arrowed over rock with a poise, a knowledge I wondered whether my mother had possessed. I watched her for hours, and she let me assist her in removing fossils, bones, from the ground, an honor my father never accorded me. Her voice gentled around me. She had no daughters, she told me, only boys, children around my age whose only interests spooled around basketball.

She told me once, your father will try to tell you there are only two stages: before and after. He will try to tell you nothing survives an extinction event, that nothing bleeds through, that there is no such thing as backward and forward contamination, the spilling over of creatures after an extinction, into other eras. He believes these things to be extreme and quick and finished in a blaze. He does not think these things drain one another; he only believes in emptiness on one end, and fullness on the other. Never a mixture.

I remembered how I had read his publications, his numerous articles on the demise of the dinosaurs across years, how he had told me that we are the products of two stages, always speaking of my mother. Before. After. A peak and a void.

She sighed, her brush delicately hovering over a crinoid in the cliff face. Look, she told me. If we are above the boundary, as we are, this should not be here. It is a creature that existed at the time of the extinction, so what business has it here, unless the boundary weaves? Unless the dying out of species does not happen all at once?

Across the grains of sediment purling lines, etchings of debris.

She said, your father scoffs when I point this out, every time. When I show him, yes, it does exist, it has trickled over the boundary, he will move on to another segment where the line is more obvious, fits his theory better.

That makes no sense, I told her. How many times had I read that the nature of science is discovery and re-evaluation?

No. She scraped away the clay, the scree, from the fossil. It swirled in her palm, curved shell wrapping the air around itself. Because you understand—there is only unbearable decline.

5. The dinosaurs are poisoned by uranium absorbed from the soil.

My father sent me to get my doctorate. I chose my mother's alma mater and wondered whether the common air, the common surfaces we had touched or the pavement we had walked, somehow seeped the two of us together.

My name was familiar to my professors and classmates; the teachers looked at me with airs of sadness, and accused me of plagiarism in the first weeks of the semester when my research proved more accurate than they had assumed, less insane than they might have hoped.

My classmates never warmed to me fully. They asked at first whether I was helping my father with his latest venture, how my research on the gassing of the dinosaurs was going, whether I had found an answer for the Permian extinction involving extraterrestrials. And I laughed, then worked through the night. My apartment was a litter of books and papers; any men who came in gave up walking across the bedroom, the kitchen, and, eventually, the living room, leaving themselves only the space at the threshold of the door in which to contain their affection.

My father called sporadically, his voice stretching across the days and weeks like continental drift, moving toward something unknown and unobtainable. He asked what I was studying, and in the background I heard Africa, China.

When I told him what I searched for, how I was sure an asteroid had killed the dinosaurs, he laughed, a cavern of a laugh, and said, may your luck be stronger than mine.

6. The dinosaurs are destroyed by particles from a faraway supernova.

My father called me from home the day I earned my doctorate. I had not expected him to be in the country. It soon became clear he was intoxicated, and I asked him, softly, as I would scrape away the dust from a bone, why he wasn't in the Rift Valley.

Sick, he said.

With what?

A long time I've been sick.

He said no more than this, wanting me to pry and dig and cajole, but I heard the sound of my classmates on the stairs outside my apartment, and had already had some whiskey. There was a silence that came gaping over us, spawning other malignant, graved silences.

I'm a doctor now, I said. This morning.

I heard his teeth scrape along the mouth of a bottle before he said, and you feel more intelligent now? Qualified to determine the illnesses of the earth?

The footsteps of my classmates were leaking away. Yes, I replied.

Because I did not want to know whether his answer would have been different, I hung up.

7. The dinosaurs are obliterated by entropy. As the universe slopes into chaos, so do their atoms.

My father called with the increasing frequency of earthquakes before a volcanic eruption, after he told me he was ill. He chased me with his voice across the world, his voice that lost boom with the days, crumbling under its own weight. I searched for what had eluded him.

He told me of the research he was still doing, book dust in his lungs, his joints creaking like boulders when he shifted. He asked where I was, but never what I had found.

I told him, I'm getting closer. We've found a gravitational anomaly in the Yucatan. Some shocked quartz.

He said, it couldn't possibly be an impact that killed them. You won't find anything.

He didn't answer when I told him otherwise, that the underwater arc at Chicxulub looked like the eye of a ghost, too perfectly rounded to be accidental; instead he told me about my childhood, my mother.

The first thing I published was when I met your mother, he said. I wrote this article when I was waiting in the hospital for you to be born. And on and on. Trying to construct around me a tomb of sediment in which to encase the version of myself, which was more like my mother, which was the one he chose to remember, to preserve, to fossilize.

8. The dinosaurs are destroyed by a cataclysm, a cryptoexplosion, that leaves the earth nearly barren. It is this that kills the dinosaurs, and not an asteroid impact, despite findings and evidence to the contrary.

My father did not listen, choked and scoffed, when I told him over the phone of my discovery.

The murderous crater was there, palmed into the coast of the Yucatan. Levelled on my radars, the earth tendered over it in folds, cenotes freckled along its edge. We analyzed sample after sample, determined this could only be the result of a massive impact, a decimating blow. My first thought was of my father, how his voice would wither when I told him, how I had memorized his words so long ago and how it was all for this. How his research would level into plains, into alluvium, into deltas where erosion scattered them.

My father left me nothing in the moment I called him to tell him of this, nothing but the clogged taste of soil, the feeling of chasing. He whispered, you found it?

I let the silence corrode.

I don't believe it. It couldn't be that. His voice drifting.

I heard the rustling of papers, the scattering of ideas in a growing void.

I felt the eras and epochs of his life shattered, then, against the hollowed crater walls, against the dust and erosions of the earth. They tasted of unfamiliar words, ones wombed in the voice of a woman I had never met.

9. It does not matter how the dinosaurs are destroyed, only that they are, only that they perish, only that their existence never mattered.

We spoke once after my discovery. He said, we met on a dig.

I was typing, so my response was narrowed between the fault lines of keystrokes. I replied, I need to finish this paper.

He whispered, your mother found fish bones in the extinction line of the boundary we were investigating. I told her, it must be a mistake. There's no way it wasn't killed at the outset. There's no way anything could survive a sudden demolition like this.

I waited for him to tell me something new.

She said, your mother: Life will linger. It will leach everything.

He hung up shortly after.

I believed my father left me nothing upon my discovery of the crater, but this has never been true. He left a span of time, memories scattered in erratics, splicing the heart of such an era into uneven plots, pocked with grooves and silt and his periods of absence, which manifested even in the spaces between his words, his pick-stroke smile, his glaciated voice. He left me a knowledge existing in the caldera hollows of my palms, the tug of magma in my veins, degrading until there was no before, no after, only fragments and fossils of the way things were once, the way they might have been.

Liz Breazeale holds an MFA in fiction from Bowling Green State University, where she worked as staff editor for the *Mid-American Review*. Her stories are forthcoming in *Carolina Quarterly* and *Passages North*, and have appeared in *Tupelo Quarterly*, *apt*, *Moon City Review*, and others.