

The Saurians' Revenge

by Michael Hartford

I've never liked birds. There's something smug about the way they look at us, we prisoners of gravity, something self-congratulatory in their songs. Maybe I'm just projecting my own feelings about being stuck on the ground, attributing attitudes to small-brained things that never give a second thought to humans, if they even think at all.

So I'm more than a little surprised to learn that they're dinosaurs' many-times-great-grandchildren, since I've always been fond of dinosaurs. The exhibit at the Science Museum lines up cross-sections of skeletons—tyrannosaurus, velociraptor, archaeopteryx, ostrich, sparrow—and points out the similarities in hips, joints, and breasts. It's unmistakable laid out in plaster casts like that, with little diagrams and photographs and artists' renderings of colorful prehistoric beasts (apparently my “Golden Book of Dinosaurs” had been wrong, they weren't monochromatic green or gray).

“Did you see this, buddy?” I ask my son. It's the day after New Year's, and I've brought Ellis to the museum to see the traveling dinosaur exhibit. His mother is at home, putting together holiday pictures for the grandparents and getting a much deserved rest.

Ellis just rolls his eyes and sighs. It's the same sound I made when I was his age and my mother tried to pronounce “ankylosaurus.” Never doubt an eight year old boy's knowledge of dinosaurs.

“I always thought they just died out,” I say, “or evolved into iguanas or something.”

“That's one theory,” he says, emphasizing “theory.” “But most paleontologists don't think they were like reptiles at all.”

“Ah.” Not that my sense of the world is built on my clearly outmoded theory that dinosaurs were giant lizards, but I feel like a leg of my already rickety ontological stool has just been kicked out.

“They were probably warm-blooded,” Ellis continues. He's playing with a giant plaster ball-and-socket joint mounted to a wall.

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“So it wasn't the Ice Age?”

“Geez, Dad!” And that was what I had said when my father asked me how cavemen hunted dinosaurs. His knowledge of prehistoric zoology was based on Raquel Welch's animal skin bikini in “One Million Years B.C.”—a more compelling vision, I'll grant, than the slow crawl from primordial ooze to homo sapiens, but not very interesting to an eight year old boy.

“Well, Ellis, your Dad hasn't kept up on the latest research,” I say. “I'm still getting over the whole Earth-goes-around-the-Sun bombshell.”

“It was a meteor shower,” Ellis says. “They can tell from the meteor dust in the layers where the dinosaurs disappear. And the little mammals that ate their eggs didn't help.”

“No, I suppose not.” Those I remembered. In my “Golden Book of Dinosaurs” there was a picture of rat-like, evil-eyed animals sucking giant dinosaur eggs, with pathetic fetal lizards inside.

“But it was mostly the meteor dust. It killed off the vegetation.”

I followed Ellis to the reproduction of a famous dig in Montana, with giant plastic bones emerging from the floor and the impressions of ancient fish in the fake rock walls. Shovels and picks and little horse-hair brushes are scattered carelessly around, but all firmly attached to the display. They beckon to be hefted and used to liberate a half-concealed triceratops skull, then giggle at the tease when you find them immobilized.

Ellis is down on his haunches, eye-to-eye-socket with the triceratops. I can tell that he's at that dinosaur dig under the Montana sun, brushing flecks of dirt from the bones, by the slow, wet breaths he's taking through his mouth. When Ellis concentrates on something, his jaw drops to his chest and he gets a glassy look in his eyes. That comes from his mother—when she's doing one of her craft projects, organizing pictures, or reading the L. L. Bean catalog, she gets the same look. My deep-in-concentration look involves cocking my head and locking up to the right, knuckles on my chin and lips puckered. Or so Cathy demonstrates when she catches me making shopping lists and planning weekend projects.

“Do you think birds know they're really dinosaurs?” I ask. The question is meant to lead Ellis to connect modern ornithology with paleontology, maybe to consider how evolution and psychology are related, or to think creatively and poetically about science. But it just comes out sounding dumb.

Ellis gives me the “shut up, Dad” look—he's still four or five years from vocalizing the thought. “I don't think dinosaurs knew they were dinosaurs,” he says over his shoulder. “That's just a word people use.”

“Ah.” He's a preternatural pragmatist, aware that we see the world with our human eyes and minds, that our ways of organizing knowledge are compromised and contingent. Except, of course, for the absolute and self-evident truth that Dad is an idiot.

“I didn't think they were so big,” he says when he turns back to the triceratops skull. It is huge, almost six feet across its bony frill. “It's almost as big as an elephant.”

I bite back my observations about modern elephants and woolly mammoths. Millions of years separate the triceratops and the mammoth. Even though my plastic dinosaur set had included a mammoth, saber tooth tiger, and cave bear among the more traditional dinosaurs, I knew the difference between the Jurassic and the Pleistocene. Though it is a little disappointing that Raquel Welch and her animal skin bikini were anachronistic among pteranodons and tyrannosaurs; she would have added something to the dig diorama.

Instead I say, “It's a pretty good display. You thinking of becoming a paleontologist?”

Ellis shakes his head. “Archaeologist,” he says. “People are more interesting.”

“That they are.”

“They do kind of the same thing.”

Ellis really isn't a strange kid. He rides his bike, he watches cartoons, he'd rather eat cereal than Brussels sprouts. But he has his scary-smart moments, and tested this spring in the ninety-fifth percentile on some standardized test. In that, too, he's his mother's

son; I suppose I'm bright enough, but it's a rather broad and shallow layer of anecdotes and factoids. Cathy has a deeper, almost tactile way of knowing things and understanding the world.

It's almost noon, so I ask, "Do you want to catch the movie at twelve thirty?"

"What's it about?"

I look at the brochure and map that I picked up at the front of the museum. "The Arctic," I say.

I'm afraid that Ellis will be disappointed—for the last couple months, it's been all dinosaurs, all the time. But his face lights up and he says, "Cool! I saw the preview on TV, it looks really wild!"

"Let's grab a hot dog," I say as he jogs through the rest of the exhibit and toward the stairs to the mezzanine level.

There are birds hanging from wires above the stairs, made of bright nylon and fancifully painted. They sway in the columns of warm air that push up from below and swirl about when they meet the chillier air above. Snow and ice sheet the long windows in the ceiling, and the open space around the stairs is wintry bright. The sort of cold bright when there are no clouds to trap the warmth and the sun is too weak to heat all that empty sky.

They must know they're dinosaurs under their feathers. Even over those long millennia from the swampy fern forests to now, some tradition of "once we ruled the earth" must persist among birds. That would account for their smugness. We descendents of egg-sucking rats may rule the earth now, but the dinosaurs didn't die out, they became beautiful and light and swift and rule the skies and make us jealous of their flight. We thought we won the game with big brains and opposable thumbs, but really it was the dinosaurs who won by playing a different game entirely.

Every year the "evolution vs. creation" argument comes back to a PTA meeting. Lately the creationists have been calling their theory "intelligent design," arguing that nature is too complex, too nuanced and intricate, to have emerged through blind chance and dumb luck. It's not a new idea—it's at least as old as Voltaire's "watchmaker God"—and it leaves lots of wiggle room. As science,

it's a flop; there's no way to falsify it, no test that would prove it wrong. It explains everything, and therefore explains nothing.

But the blind chance and dumb luck branch of evolution seems equally wrong to me, because of the birds. What if there were a third way, a different origin of species? Ellis knows he's smarter than me, knows it deep in his bones, just like I knew that I was smarter than my father. And Ellis will do all that he can to break away from me, to take a path better than mine and his mother's. Why else, after all, did I go to college and get a degree in philosophy and find a job in an office and work my way into middle management, than to be something different from my father, foreman of the second shift for twenty years?

And the same drive that makes children fly past their parents is what compels parents to push their young out of the nest. Some of them, at least; I suppose there must have been dinosaur parents who scoffed at their offspring's first faltering attempts at flight, who shook their heads at this new fashion of wearing feathers and sprouting wings. A few probably even forbade flight, made their children stay on the ground; these became emus and ostriches, bitter about never reaching their potential. Flightless birds spend years in therapy.

But some dinosaur parents must have encouraged their proto-avian progeny. Sure, they were wrapped up in the day-to-day concerns of meteor dust and egg-sucking rats, but they saw their children's futures in the sky. "Fly, son!" they'd say in their roars and honks, "You can do better than I did." And their children would look back over their feathery shoulders and think, "What an idiot."

"Come on, Dad!" Ellis shouts. I'm still climbing the steps, my knees feeling the cold and the gravity, and he's standing at the snack bar, next in line. He may be more evolved, but I'm the one with cash.

I pay for the hot dogs and follow Ellis to the theater. The current showing is still going on, and a line is forming at the doors. Most of the adults in line have kids hanging onto their hands or jittering by their legs, anxious to get inside. The kids are making an excited

hum, but the parents are mostly silent, looking at their watches and counting the change in their pockets. The adults have adult concerns—paying the parking ramp attendant, getting home for supper, making sure tomorrow's clothes get into the dryer, protecting the nest from egg-sucking rats.

“Polar bears aren't really white,” Ellis says around a mouthful of hot dog. The poster by the door has a photograph of a polar bear emerging from the sea onto a snowy sheet of ice. “They're not any color.”

“You don't say. Do they eat penguins?”

Ellis punches my hip. “Geez, Dad, you are such an idiot! Penguins live in the Antarctic!”

Of course, I know that. I learned it when I was eight, from an “Encyclopedia Brown” mystery. But if my new theory of evolution is right, I'll be helping Ellis fly farther and higher by flaunting my idiocy. I want him to be a sparrow, son of the biggest and dumbest dinosaur, not an ostrich who tried to be more like Dad.

I bend down to hug him and plant a kiss on his forehead; he comes up to my chest now, and in a few years he'll shoot past me. His mother's genes and those despised Brussels sprouts have given him a head start for the clouds.

Ellis squirms away from me, arms flailing. “Come on, Dad! You're getting really goofy!”

“Goofier than you can know,” I say.

