Thousands of skeletons have been discovered at Vilnius, still wearing the brass buttons of the Grand Army of Napoleon, stopped cold on the road home from Moscow. Their stiff postures remind me of my mother’s relatives tossed in a trench by passing Einsatzkommandos a few hours away in Berestovitsa, where I could find them, if I cared to visit.

Bones are everywhere—in the Rift Valley and in Rwanda, underfoot in the catacombs, crouching in caves at Herculaneum, stacked like crockery in Cambodia. I used to think I’d make a nice clean specimen myself, like the box of bones they handed out years ago in Gross Anatomy. We passed the bones around, rubbing the bumps and sounding the crippled Latin: capitulum, epicondyle, a vocabulary for looking underneath the skin: ars moriendi instead of ars vivendi, saying goodbye to the flesh over a long lifetime of study and discipline: aficionados of disease, doctors of disintegration. And you see we are perfect at this diablerie: for a fee (a sol or two) we will predict your death before you can imagine it, when your skin still flushes with pleasure, and the blood pumps in your thighs, dear amateurs! And after you’re dead, perhaps you’ll visit my quaint relatives in Belarus: tell them your sad stories and ask them to sing those sacred melodies one hears below the ground. In the meantime, while shreds of appetite still cling to your bones, here’s my prescription: Burn, burn, burn!

Robert Layzer M.D.