

The monkey puzzle trees at the Dick Institute are the only breeding pair in Ayrshire. They soar into a jumble of branches on each side of the path to the library, framing the statue of Minerva that crowns the portico. Go through the doors and you'll find the goddess of wisdom inside too, softer and more studious in stained glass as you walk up the steps to the museum. Armour and spear have been swapped for silken robes, and she's flanked by the tools of art and literature, the easel and the pen.

The stairway splits; left or right? Race you to the top! Four pillars frame the square of the gallery. If you lean over the slim cases that edge the balcony you can look down on the mosaic floor of the entrance hall below. Old photos lie under the glass today - the opening of the public library in 1901, the ladies' reading room repurposed as an auxiliary ward - but these cases once held part of the natural history collection. Behind the black and white images I sense ghosts of South American beetles, their carapaces a sheen of green. I remember children being held up to ooh in awe at the stick and leaf insects, monstrous and dead. I had to stand on tiptoes to see the lepidopterist's dream; *Papilio menelaus*, swept from the highest canopies and pinned to a card, its wings the bluest thing.

Back then, I'd go to the North Museum first, pushing open the heavy door on the right hand side of the gallery. Waves of seashells washed towards me, pearly nautili giving way to a swell of minerals. Bulbous haematite and twinkling fool's gold, all in cases sturdy enough to bear my elbowed weight. And a curious new genus, paperweights. Glassy and thick with whorls of colour, each one a crystal ball. Labels were tiny and neat in copperplate or courier, all names, no narrative. Back then it was all in the mind, the stories creeping up over time. That fossil fish? The man who found it in Orkney was killed in Amiens, on the eighth of August 1918.

Straight ahead there was a dugout canoe, its dark wood cracked but robust, excavated from land once owned by Robert Burns' father. Perhaps people in the Iron Age felt their world too small, just as Rabbie did, and tried to paddle their escape down the Annick Watter. Some crafts didn't quite make it, sinking in the soft mud near the banks rather than coasting on the current all the way to the sea. Downstairs I leafed through the archaeology books in the adult library, imagining handling thick volumes and delicate specimens behind a door marked Private, edging my way into the wider world.

Studying for my standard grades, I walked from inorganic to animate, from lapis to sharks' teeth. Imagine that in a necklace, those searing through flesh! I'd sneak into the final room, a bright rise of glass cabinets and taxidermy birds, settle on a cast iron radiator in the far corner and unwrap my sandwich. Always listening for the tread of the janny's feet on the floorboards, the more-than-likely expulsion to the rain-spattered steps of the war memorial. Around the door arched the

jawbones of a fin whale, shining from generations of furtive hands; strange how something dead can seem so vital.

In the museum, the past seemed a pathway to the future, each artefact a votive offering. If I could take that shabti figure by the hand, it would guide me. I'd read E Nesbit's *The Story of the Amulet* in the children's library, I knew such things were possible.

Walking into the South Museum now, twenty years later, the displays are new but the smell is the same. Plaster and polish and age. If Minerva's wisdom had a scent, surely this would be it, this and the leather bindings and paperback pages of the lending library. Tracing the exhibits along the back wall I try to glimpse family faces in the collieries and potteries, the monumental machine shops and whisky bonds. Virtute et Industria, and an interpretation panel due to be revised to show Johnnie Walker fleeing his home town, another four hundred jobs gone.

The local newspaper used to be bigger than a broadsheet, tight packed with type. One advertisement shows a ponytailed girl in Capri pants laughing as she spins plates of vinyl in TF Campbell's new record department. In 1962, you could buy the world's top trouser in Lamont's of King Street. The town bustles across these two splayed pages, more cosmopolitan than I thought it could ever have been.

Last stop for the day is an instrument lodged in my childhood imagination. Angled towards the window, its wooden body looks warm to the touch, its brass glows familiar as an old friend. Andrew Barclay near bankrupted his engineering firm in his efforts to see further, see more. The mirrors in his telescopes were flawed and his observations odd – Saturn, shaped as a half-eaten apple? - but still he kept searching for the unrevealed wonders of the heavens. Astronomers mocked but maybe he was right. From this small museum in this small town, you can see the whole world and the stars above.