Name: _____ Date: _____

The Last Page of the Sketchbook

Reading level 12 (8th grade) · 577 words

The comment was not meant to be unkind. On Monday, while the class was waiting for the bell, Marcus's friend Jonah glanced at the open sketchbook on his desk, at the page of Triceratops skulls and the careful shading along a long, curving tail, and said, "Do you still draw those? It's kind of a little kid thing, isn't it?" Marcus shrugged and closed the cover, and he did not open it again for the rest of the day. That night, he stared at the ceiling and wondered whether Jonah was right.

On Tuesday, Marcus went to the library instead of drawing, half hoping to find a reason to quit. Instead, he found a book about the artists who bring extinct animals back to life on paper, and he read it through twice. Paleo-artists, he learned, do not simply invent a creature. They begin with the bones, which show where the muscles attached, how big the body was and how the animal probably stood. Then they study living animals, such as birds and crocodiles, to work out what lies between the skeleton and the skin.

The next surprise was how much the pictures had to change. Marcus read that Spinosaurus was once drawn as a land animal built like T. rex, until better fossils showed that it had short legs and a paddle-like tail. The old pictures were not foolish, because they were simply the best guess that the evidence allowed at the time. And when Marcus thought about Velociraptor, which had feathers but could not fly, he realized that half the dinosaurs in his sketchbook were probably out of date. The idea thrilled him far more than it embarrassed him.

On Wednesday, he started a fresh drawing, and this time he worked the way the book described. He began with a sketch of the skeleton, measuring the ribs and the long bones of the legs, and then he added muscle over the frame. Each decision needed a reason, so he kept asking himself why the tail was this thick and what the animal's shoulders would look like when it stepped forward. It took him three evenings, and by the end he had erased more than he had kept. But the animal on the page looked heavy and real, as though it might breathe.

The following Monday, a poster in the hallway announced that the school art show needed entries by Friday, and Marcus stopped in front of it for a long time. Jonah, passing by with his backpack, stopped as well. "Is that the dinosaur?" he asked, looking at the sheet that was peeking out of Marcus's folder. Marcus hesitated, and then he held it up for him to see. Jonah was quiet for a long moment, studying the shading along the ribs. "Okay," he said finally. "That does not look like a little kid thing."

Marcus did not turn the drawing in because Jonah approved of it, and he knew that. He turned it in because it was the best work he had ever done, and because he liked what it showed: a creature that was gone, drawn carefully from the evidence it left behind. That night, he opened

the sketchbook to its last page, which had been empty for weeks, and wrote a short title at the bottom of the new drawing before taping it in. He thought for a while about what to write, and then he wrote only one line: "Still looking."

Questions

1. What did Jonah say about Marcus's drawings?

A. They were the best in class
B. They were too messy
C. They were a little kid thing

2. According to the story, where do paleo-artists begin?

A. With the bones
B. With a guess
C. With a photograph

3. Why did the Spinosaurus pictures change?

A. Artists got bored
B. Better fossils showed it had short legs and a paddle-like tail
C. A museum asked for a new style

4. Why did Marcus enter the drawing in the show?

A. Jonah told him to
B. He was proud of his work, not only because Jonah liked it
C. His teacher made him

5. In this story, what does "hesitated" mean?

A. Ran away
B. Shouted loudly
C. Paused before deciding

Words to know

extinct: died out forever
evidence: facts that prove
embarrassed: ashamed or awkward
hesitated: paused, unsure

Answer key: The Last Page of the Sketchbook

1. C. They were a little kid thing
2. A. With the bones
3. B. Better fossils showed it had short legs and a paddle-like tail
4. B. He was proud of his work, not only because Jonah liked it
5. C. Paused before deciding