

Valda Jackson

H a n d l e w i t h C a r e (How I feel)

*Voice one  
(Young female,  
accent UK)*

We pass around human remains.  
I hold a person's skull in my hand;  
feel its roundness, toughness, its weight,  
and texture, small pits and dents.  
Like a thing handmade, modeled in clay.

The scientific stuff of facts and supposition float in the air  
while I, cupping my hand atop the crown,  
marvel at its size, its density.  
Compact.  
And so small.

I compare its scale to those of the living, breathing people around me.  
There is volume in breath...In life.

And then –

one small piece of rib.  
Fragments.  
Dust.  
A sprinkling that escapes its plastic entombment – remains  
caught in the fold of my open book.  
The centrefold.

Bones returned to boxes.

Were they labeled – 'Fragile'?  
– Or 'Handle With Care'?

'Handle With Care'

And we did.  
We all handled with care.

Were they purchased? These Bones.  
Again?  
Treasured more now?  
– or less, than when with breath and life that register hurt and feels pain  
yet roughly handled.  
Brutally.

Now though,  
valued in different measure.  
Handled with care.

Handled with care.

Fragments and dust –  
Remains in a crevice.

Rubbing my finger slowly down the inner spine, I feel the gritty, uneven texture of ground bone.

*Voice two*  
*(young male*  
*accent UK)*

*“In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread,  
till thou return unto the ground;  
for out of it wast thou taken:  
for dust thou art, and  
unto dust shalt thou return.”*

*Voice one*  
*(young female,*  
*accent UK)*

Sister  
Brother  
Ancestor  
I hesitate to turn the page.

...

*Voice Two*  
*(young male,*  
*accent UK)*

I am here only because you were, and are, strong.  
You cannot know what your short time represents.  
You have peopled a tribe. Generations that thrive  
‘longside the void; those missing that we yearn for.  
Great, great grand mothers  
Your sons, your daughters  
– Creator  
Life giver.

*Voice Three*  
*(Older female*  
*accent Caribbean)*

What kind o’ whip that?  
It’s not catgut. What that thing; eee?  
When she holding it up, wrapping it round she hand  
– the thing look stiff like  
– I don’t know what.  
I never see a natural thing look like that.  
Is what?

When she swing the thing,  
it drop down heavy like lead;

And drag and bust up the skin.  
Cut deep into flesh.

Back open-up on the first lick.  
Lord!  
Flesh just burst open.  
Cut-up.

But it’s not the mash-up-mash-up flesh make she stop.  
She never like the blood touch her.

...

When she take that last swing and likkle blood splash-up on her  
– she leap back. Fling down the whip. Run back to the house, wiping she face  
like blood have heat, and burning.

We now, rushing; we cut you down.  
Carry you back.  
And is old Sylfred pick it up. New thing they call whip.

And when him showing it to us  
– still blood-up-blood-up with  
skin and flesh –

And none of us, we *never*  
see a thing like that.

The thing tough. It heavy.  
Covered all over with stiff short bristle. Look like stubble.  
I don't know what it is, but  
– none of us believe seh you could survive that.  
None of us.

Is the speed.  
The speed weh the thing draw blood, weh mek we all cry out.  
We all cry out.

We feeling it.  
We all feeling it.

...

*Voice One*  
*(young female,*  
*Accent UK)*

What can you do when agony torments, and soothing is unthinkable?  
When I cannot bear a touch –  
cannot stand another hand laid on me – to inject, another procedure  
– No.

Not another extraction of my blood.  
No further small incision.

And when it's all over – Please, let my flesh not feed this land, for I was  
never part of it.

Burn me.

Just burn me to dust, and  
throw my ashes to the wind.

But you, here still by my bedside,  
take my feet in your two hands, gently.  
First one,  
then the other.

And you don't release me when I resist – kicking at hands that begin to feed  
my skin with oil.

You soothe.

Anointed.

You cup my heels in gentle pressure

and  
I  
am  
stilled.

...

*Voice Four*  
*(mature female,*  
*accent UK)*

I must cradle these heels that kick up dust; and stamps the ground  
– that draws us all but too soon.  
And you fight.  
Resist.

But in your resistance, still, here is your submission.

Yes. I will not let you be un-held.

Can-not.

For there is nothing else.  
No matter we plead the All Mighty that you remain, healed, strong of breath,  
and live.

You are my god. And I am yours.

...

*Voice one*  
*(young female,*  
*accent UK)*

Sister –  
When you and I were young, we, a pair, shared a bed at night.  
We played, moved together. Conjoined twins, we whispered, did mischief.  
We danced.  
And I wished to please you,  
big sister. I see you strong. No pushover.  
Fighter.  
Doing battle daily. And win or lose, not defined.  
Never believing that circumstances made you, made me, made us poorer,  
lesser than  
– No.

From you, I learned how to ready myself for each day, for whatever  
onslaught.

How can I feel deserted?

For your gift – for you abide with me still.

Sister, in health your vigour overwhelms.

Sister, still, even still

– I am in awe.

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