

# Shall These Bones Live?

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*Lanie Jones*

Shall These Bones Live?

*Lady of silences*

*Calm and distressed*

*Torn and mostly whole...<sup>1</sup>*

She stood in the shadows watching the sleeping man.

His chest rose and fell gently with each breath, his naked body white as bone in the moonlight streaming through the open window. With desire sated, his caged heart was quiet, his tongue still. Now she could listen to the spaces between his heartbeats, just as earlier she had listened to the spaces between his words.

He had spoken of love, knitting their future together as if it were one garment. But while his lips were making promises, his thoughts were unravelling the moment, more interested in the dividing of her thighs than in the uniting of their lives. She'd known as soon as she met him that his words were treacherous but she had listened anyway. She always listened.

Love. What was love? Such a small word to mean so many different things. In all her seasons of scrupulous listening she'd found this word, more than most, danced to many tunes. *Love your neighbours* Jesus had told his followers, and they'd spent centuries converting and colonising and killing, to make their neighbours lovable.

All words had the power to wound, but love's sweet speeches, bleeding into emptiness the minute they were uttered, hurt more than most. She had once read a book by a prophet who spoke of being *wounded by love and being willing to bleed joyfully*,<sup>2</sup> as if he knew the pain of love himself. But how could he know the wounds of women?

The man moved in his sleep, revealing on the white sheets, the dark stain his loving had leeches from her. She had been willing to bleed for love but where was his sacrifice? The oneness his words had conjured demanded more than a single bloodletting if love was to mean anything at all.

But did it mean anything? The Frenchman, Barthes, had written of love as an *engulfment*, yet it was the *image* of the lover that engulfed him, rather like the images that people held of words; shimmering reflections of their own

experiences that overlooked the shapes of different constructions. *Sometimes it is an excessive happiness which enables me to unite with the image ...*<sup>3</sup> Her lover too, despite his promises, craved only her image, a feminine reflection of himself. He hadn't bothered to look beyond his own desire, or to ask what his loving might mean to her.

It was her own fault; she had wanted to be persuaded, had been willing to open herself to him and his slippery words so that he could prove her wrong. Prove that he was different from the others. *Taking a chance on love ...* She hummed the tune softly under her breath. He'd had his chance and he had failed. She shrugged; that was nothing new.

Only her spilt blood, black as jet in the moonlight, was new. Well then, in the blending of their blood, let his words of oneness become realised.

Her fingers flexed, a movement as insubstantial as the sigh that whispered from her throat. Three white leopards padded from the darkness behind her, their pelts gleaming as they plunged into the silver stream that illuminated her lover. She smiled, withdrawing from the shadows herself, moving closer to watch. In the light, her gown was the colour of snow, her body a shadow in the frost.

The leopards leapt lightly onto the bed. The man woke, his eyes languid, dream-misted, then suddenly wide with shock. His body jerked, his legs scrambling absurdly. The largest leopard rested its milky paw on the man's throat, shutting off a scream.

It was a pity. She thought the words he might have spoken then would have rung with truth.

Later, she lay on the bed listening to the leopards crunching bones.

The moonlight had gone and a pale dawn glow tinged the unstained part of her gown with faintest pink. The rest of it was black with blood, and sticky, like the sheets rumped around her. Somewhere – it sounded very far away – she could hear someone laughing.

She felt like laughing herself but she had to think, had to make some meaning out of the mess she was in. Now that the man wasn't distracting her with words of love, she could reflect on the making of it. She stared at the ceiling, trying to understand the sequences and consequences of lovemaking. Words, it was obvious, were where it all began. The caresses, the penetration, the melding of bodies were all secondary to the words.

She frowned, concentrating, trying to recall his voice, trying to embody the words with the man. It was difficult; speech was elusive, a ghost. She should have asked him to write her a letter. Her frown deepened. Orderly black marks

on a page would have been something; now she had nothing. Perhaps he had said nothing. Perhaps the words that had stirred her body and then her resentment were only echoes of the love promises made by all men. She imagined all those promises tumbling through the ages to condense in the moment he had entered her body. Had he been her scapegoat, then? Was he not personally guilty of the words he had died for?

No matter. No use crying over spilt blood.

The important question was whether the pleasure was worth the sacrifice. She closed her eyes, sighed; possibly. It was too soon to say. She guessed that the making, like the word, could dance to many tunes. So be it; bring on the music, her body was ready to sing. But next time she would choose the rhythm, the timing, the beat. Next time she would make the song linger and play with different melodies.

Next time she would explore all the harmonies of bodies in duet before she let the leopards loose.

She smiled. The leopards sang their own song and when it came to the crunch, deathmaking was more exciting than lovemaking. Death held far more secrets than love. But there was time to explore both; while she learned love's lyrics she would pluck the enigmas from death's heart, one by one, song by song.

The largest leopard jumped onto the bed and settled beside her, licking its paws. She threw her arm across it and snuggled into its side. Burying her face in its fur, she fell asleep.

<sup>1</sup> Eliot, T.S. (1972) 'Ash-Wednesday' (1930) in *The Waste Land and other poems*, London: Faber and Faber, p.55.

<sup>2</sup> Gibran, K. (1970) *The Prophet*, London: Heinemann, (first published 1926) p.15

<sup>3</sup> Barthes, R. (1990) *A Lover's Discourse: fragments*, Harmondsworth: Penguin (first published 1977) p.11