

Ancestry

I've always felt it in my bones.
I've always felt a sweeping sorrow
In the pit of my stomach,
An open pit of a great hollow;
A peach pit at my heart
As hard as stone,
That will not move or grow.

My bones, they carry
The memory
Not just of my life
But of the lives of my forebears.

I've heard the whisper of "slavery"
In my family,
Though then we turn away,
Too fearful to face
What our bones may be made of.

But now I know
From names that could not be mistaken.

De Chazal.
One family in this world
Goes by that name.
My great-grandmother's maiden name.
De Chazal.
Colonisers of Mauritius,
Upper classes,
And how liberated from constraints
Did my great-grandmother feel
As she rode her bicycle
To the next village.

The slave owner register.
In 1834 the slave trade was abolished,
And in the biggest payout in British history,
The slave owners made claims for compensation
For the loss of their slaves.
Nineteen De Chazals

Owned between them at that time
851 slaves, for which they received between them £25,000 -
£2million in the money of today.

Eight hundred and fifty-one slaves.
Their bones turn in their graves
Awaiting their own compensation for the loss of their lives.

And my bones, living bones
I know carry such sadness,
Like old bones,
Lonely old bones,
That want nothing more than to make recompense
For the lives of those 851 slaves
And all that came before them
And all that lived outside my family line.

My bones are sad and tired
At the chasm that lies
Between my life
And the life of a person free of being a coloniser,
Strong enough to stand on their own feet
And not stand crushing the bones of others.

I have never been in shackles.
I have never been forced
To give up my life
And be subservient to another.

These days
My family owns no slaves
But all the things that lie around me,
Everything I use and eat and drink
Were brought to me by an enslaved world.

Of course it is easier
To be the coloniser
Than to be the colonised.
But I know
Right down deep into my bones
That this is no game
Where one side wins and one side loses.

This is a world where if one is not free,
None of us are free.
And my bones, they know,
There's no running from what's been done.

The shackles may not cut my flesh,
But the weight, it is so heavy
And the aching sorrow haunts my soul.