

Exquisite Heats

CHERRYL FLOYD-MILLER is an American poet, playwright and fiber artist. A native of the Carolinas, she is noted for exploring cultural and feminine themes through folklore and sound devices. She has written two previous volumes of poems, *Utterance: A Museology of Kin* and *Chops*, which won a 2005 AIGA Gold SEED Award. Her work has appeared in numerous literary journals and anthologies, including *Poetry*, *Crab Orchard Review*, *Poemeleon*, *Terminus* and *MiPoesias*. A grant/fellowship recipient of Poets & Writers, Inc., Caldera, Idyllwild Summer in Poetry, Cave Canem, the Indiana Arts Commission and the Vermont Studio Center, she is a freelance writer and teaches independent writing courses in her community.

Also by Cherryl Floyd-Miller

POETRY

Utterance: A Museology of Kin
Chops

Exquisite Heats

CHERRYL FLOYD-MILLER



CAMBRIDGE

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For “Zeke,” the original “Voodoo Chicken”

For Nile and Hannibal: Here are the instructions—how and how not to love . . .

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Part One

It is just like fire; fire can heat your house or burn it down.

—FRANK LUNTZ

Trapeze: The Greatest Show on Earth

ONE.

A day of circus. My brother and I shimmy & jive in back seats under the cream leather roof of our bay brown family thunderbird. For five hard-earned dollars, we will get life-size posters of midget twins in tuxedos, drum rolls & a ringmaster. Lions & cheetahs crawl from immense steel play pens and I don't blink. We, a black family from a shabby house, have rubbed two nickels together for change. Even the flying Wallendas can't hang and connect from our trapezes.

Two.

We are a three-ring family flying our car bird to Richmond. We want circus. Daddy peels a five-dollar bill from his wad of ones so we can see clowns, painted men who look like bright nosegays—pinks, reds, oranges, white and jumping yellows. Daddy's face is many browns and frowns. I look at him looking at clowns, sucking popcorn husk from his teeth, same enamel suck
noise
of the tongue as it slides over bicuspid making mouth wind after meat. In an end ring, 22 clowns have begun to stow themselves in a chartreuse Volkswagen bug. I remember that we have come to this tent riding the hum of nut brown metallic roar and dreams. Beneath an alabaster cowhide roof,
amid
knocking pistons, we are flowers, larkspurs blooming in daddy's yucca blades.

THREE.

The hucksters. Peddling peculiar to 5,000 natural curiosities.
In frenetic dramas, they've got our little red wagons:
Gen. Tom Thumb's thick minikin thighs scoot & ski
past ropedancers, tumblers; Gunther the Trainer cracks
the whip, leads the leopards tawny and black spots to jump
through fire. The one-trick pony simply gallops, nothing more.
Cud-chewing llamas raise their necks peeking us. We are a caravan
dressed in glimmer and dust, black people with pocket change.
We stagger in wide-eyed applause.

FOUR.

We are wire walkers. A black family from a threadbare house. Our own.
We have saved months of candy money for carnival. An enclosed car
of traveling talents, we entertain spectators, give a series of farcical
acts that end in faith. The greatest of these is putting *one day* and *soon*
in the same sentence. We survive falls. Plunge thousands of feet into straw.
Nothing is there to catch us.

Feng Shui

All my life, we've been
a single shot gun house,
a front and back door aligned.

Where I've entered worlds through you
(as a firstborn notmyfathersson woman),
we've chased the idea of the hug
around straight-edged corners
in affectionate rooms.

First yin you taught me, Mama,
was to throw away everything
you don't love—

starting with love.

Don't say it. Show it, don't say it.

A meridian between mother
and daughter divides.

Even now as I hear you
telephone the words
into me long distance,

I'm removing all the mirrors
from these walls.

Gray: 1981

for JVK (12.16.00–7.16.03)

A.

In the small, private eon after the gun goes off, I check to see if we are dead, if the burden of bodies huddled in my bed is bloody, insides out. The bullet has missed us all—baby brother beneath the covers clasped below my ribs, another brother fastened around my neck, Mama, knife in hand, crouched near the footboard, and me, screaming. Above the heartbeat in my throat, and the creaking mattress coils, I am the lead noise in the night. We are waiting for the footsteps in the hallway to get to us.

B.

I imagine how we will look on the front page next to the missing Atlanta children. Know our names will stretch out beneath black headlines and taut white smiles. We could be remembered as *happy* and *well-fed*. As *Smart, Our Boy*, and *The Baby*—In that order. As *She Worked Hard For Her Kids*. As *What Was Wrong With Him?* The world would begin to identify us through the half-unknowing anecdotes of John Aruja or Alice Pierce, by the dusty path we walk each morning to the row of mailboxes on Carolina Rest Home Road. In order to catch a yellow bus to school. *Edward Hope Smith, Alfred Evans, Angel Lenair, Milton Harvey, Yusef Bell . . .* We could be among those names. *Cherryl, Toby, Chadric and Vivian Floyd*. And Wallace, the distraught husband, my father, who might send our bodies plunging, afterwards, a splash from the Gaston river bridge.

C.

I smell smoke. The roof of my mouth burns with tears. His footfall reaches the door to my room. The knob turns. The shadow, my father (who does not smoke) walks into my scream. Diffuses it. *Where is the gun?* A cig hangs from his face. I can make out the dimpled embers near his mouth. Ash. My eyes are swimming in the smoky corona of light.

Is

1.

In *Glyph*, the mind of Percival Everett's Baby Ralph asks, "Is a photograph always present tense?" As in here I *am*! There you *are*! This *is* us as we are about to . . . as if it hasn't happened. As if we don't know our lives before and after the *is*.

2.

be: show: occupy space: go or come: equal in identity:
signify: belong: exist: remain undisturbed or untouched

In a flash, it all *is*. We are all *is*.

3.

G.E.P. & Gio (separate *is*'s) won't
permit picture takers to take them.
Steals part of the soul, they say.
But I am sneaky, eye them anyway,
eye their I's for soul, take away
their heats, preserve them in retina,
slip them onto films of *was* until I speak
them again. now, here I am bringing them
into speech about not taking (giving)
pictures. I say, *G.E.P. is: Gio is*.
And they are present.

4.

In this picture, I am a bride. I am also a daughter, sister, cousin, in-law, niece, grandchild. A four-month fetus is inside of me (but you only know because I am telling). I am dancing my first steps as wife. A skinny man wearing a kufi and sprawling lips is holding me. He is in my eyes. Taking me.

I burn this picture. Set afire its membranes and shadows. It is no more: It was: We were.

5.

Here I speak of it,
signif it for you. Disturb,
touch it, retrace its haunt.

It is a picture again. It is.

Weaned: *Breaking the Habit of Pork*

FIRST TRIMESTER ://

No matter what I smell, it's a hot dog. And (from miles away) makes me sick. It was Andre who reminded me how meat factories take remnants from the pig, cow, or chicken and stuff them into paper-thin edible skins to make the wiener. All-American. Brand name Oscar-Meyer. Garlic and coloring, usually Red Dye No. 254 or something close to that. Boiled and stuffed in a bun, the wiener makes a nice pocket of leftovers. Remains. Food that wasn't wanted somewhere else.

SECOND TRIMESTER ://

I want it. The baby wants it. We want minced barbecue from Ralph's with coleslaw on a round bun. So I beg my husband to drive the winding mountain roads from Indianapolis to North Carolina just to get us a Ralph's barbecue sandwich. Because he loves me, he does. Eleven hours, he drives us to satisfy our craving. My mouth waters for the vinegary, red pepper hot in my mouth. But the moment I open the sandwich wrapper and the smell wafts to my nose, I am sick again. Squeamish. The thought of remnant meat from the hot dog remains. Minced pork is also a leftover stuffed into a bun. Pulled pig that was not used somewhere else.

THIRD TRIMESTER ://

Bloody hog killings and souse. Pork trimmings pickled, cubed, soaked in cider vinegar and chilled. Chitterlings. Pig brains and eggs. Pickled pigs' feet. Hog maws. Pork rinds. Fatback. All that is left over when the good meat is already gone. *There was a time*, my granny says, *when fatback meat was all we had. Little pork never hurt anybody at all.* I walk into the feast of swine leftovers in my mother's house. Smell makes me queasy. Odor embedding in my skin. I wash my hands insanely so that my skin will smell like skin again. But the pig remains. It is here left over in every corner of the house. The scent of it does not linger somewhere else.

Character Language

(for my son)

Though birds and aliens
constellate to read us,
the language of hugging
has no alphabet.

Fawning limbs etched
into one another
have two component parts—
one, purpose, the other, sound.

To muffle love into rayon shoulders
or swathe it in mute cotton shirts,
human arms the smallest unit
of touch still capable of meaning.

I hug you and become interpretable,
bearing both an intimacy and distance,

an etymology of us traced
from first impression
once removed—

to the way you now
indent me.

Otherness

*"I am in exile. Like everybody else, I live in a world that is given to me . . .
But it is not my native home."*

— PAUL GOODMAN, "Speaking and Language," *Defence of Poetry*, 1971

A woman I know well has stolen my face.
She answers for me when someone asks my profession:
Writer, she says, then readies our body for the certain assault.

She makes small talk with my family
about the births and deaths of old neighbors and friends
and sidesteps the cancer that licks at my mother's brain,

malignancy that waits for my own breast or bones or lungs.
The woman has died for me a thousand times,
tends the pocks and scars that come from simple breathing.

When I am in the company of black poets, she holds
my tongue. Does not protest against the suitable way
to be black enough . . . (write black enough poems).

My children adore her. She tells them stories
about how they came to be, gives them James Brown
over a plate of dirty rice, peach chutney and fried fish.

But there are days my son detects me (a front
can lie; a back always tells). He walks around the back of me
to find the face. Somewhere in the contour

of practiced muscle and grin, he discovers the brittle pupils,
cups the raised cheekbones, pulls me eye-to-his-eye,
asks the face: *Mommy, are you there?*

Fall of the House of Dora

[And now, the slaughter of the house, a snafu of the splintered wood. The steel ball wrecks a chemistry between preservation and memory. The zenith of her high-bread days now gone, she sags: A Mississippi blues on a Carolina washboard with spoons. The hip Old Girl must die. Her belly ruptures.] Half your life becomes hypothesis:

An uncontested maybe. You can no longer test the theorem that your grandmother can make anything delicious from leftover snafu, In her once bright kitchen, you can't watch her drag bowlegs and a busted hip between a sink and a wood stove to see if a dash of water sizzles, if the chemistry of chicken fat and cast iron yields the best salted herring this side of the Mississippi. [The back porch has come down. And with it,] the zenith

of slop buckets and corncobs for squealing hogs. (And with that) the zenith of gingham dish towels and aluminum foot tubs bearing pea pods. There was the theory that breakfast was best at 5 a.m. with a side of scrambled pig brains and eggs. *Mississippi just don't get down like that*, your grandmother said, just as her son, the snafu Uncle William, staggered through the screen door, his drunken breath a sour chemistry of morning halitosis and ripple, his eyes more red than a rose hip.

[Glass flies, the wrecker caves the face of the house] where you with newly curved hips once sat with empty Hi-C cans and fabric at your grandmother's feet, the zenith of your learning. Footstools. Crazy quilts with no patterns. You loved the smelly chemistry of sulfur and old chimney smoke in bedcovers, over sunk-belly mattresses, the maxim being that you had a place to lay your head. You'd never make the snafu of complaining. *Because there were plenty of folks from East BoonFuck to Mississippi*

who didn't have an ounce of all your blessings. (Now Mississippi from East BoonFuck was a place you'd never been, even when you used to hop on one leg, spit in the dirt, squeeze your eyes tight, and wish for other places.) The snafu of falling face down and eating grit made you grateful, yet wanting to reach the zenith of cotton fields, a strawberry patch. To disremember your grandmother's house, to postulate on what it would be to stand short in a city landmine of buildings, to know the chemistries of bigger places. [But this is now the biggest place you've ever known, a chemistry of your blood, the crumbling house a better find than red clay in Mississippi, lives and times that must now be left to who-said and grand hypothesis.] You will have to trust yourself to remember all the girls you've been here : hip prima donna and spunky little tomboy picking cotton. The old Zenith television still in the front room will help, if memory fails and you snafu