

Bone to Bone

by

Clarinda Harriss

*(a short story based on a real-life situation
recounted to the author by friend and poet Lucille Clifton.)*

BONE TO BONE

This is the kind of poem I wrote when I was young, when Tyson Roland my husband and beloved lover was alive, when my children were no more than buds setting off the barely unfurled black rose that was myself. Then as now, the idiom was not truly my own, but I can still recite the opening from memory:

I love my skin
 thin
Across my bebop
 hips
my dress pressed
 slim
from bone to bone
 trombone
Jesus rising gold
 to hold

in my thin hand. . . .

I would have to look back in that early book, *Trombone Jesus*, to remember what I off-rhymed “hand” with, but I assume it was “my man.” I was in the first part of my blues phase and I was trying to work ‘thin’ as if it were as good as “fat”—not merely the “phat” of urban slang but the abundance exemplified by the divinely rounded poet Lucille Clifton who preceeded me in my State of Maryland sinecure. The fact is that I was as thin in those days as I am now, at a time when flesh blooming full and sweet on a black woman was taking on a lyric currency comparable to the ‘eyes gray as glass’ and ‘lily paps’ of the Elizabethan sonneteers’ girl goddesses. I was plain skinny my entire life, and black as a prune.

Here’s another piece from that same book, or perhaps the one that came right after it,

My Name Sugar:

My hot little butt

make me yo

big leg woman

even tho

My whole body

got no mo

meat that yo

mama big toe.

I cringe. Mother was right to be appalled. “Common as dirt,” she said. But it was worse than that. It was purely phony—no part of her tradition or mine. I had had to learn about woofin,’ playing the dozens, the same way as white people: from Black History programs on public television, and later from the so-called White Rappers. Mother was so upset by “Yo Mama Toe” that I learned once and for all never again to show her anything I wrote.

The night I brought *My Name Sugar* home, my purple-haired grandmother—she and Mother lived in the same big old house on East Chase street in downtown Baltimore—tottered on her quad-cane to one of the tottery antique tables in the living room, clawed up a silver-framed tintype photograph, and tottered back to me with it trembling in her hand.

“Look. This is my mother, your great-grandmother Florence. Look at that waist, those slim little hands. Slim! Perfect! She was a schoolteacher! She taught elocution and proper handwriting! She would die all over again if she saw that book of yours. Those poems. Those poems you write.”

I remember how my grandmother’s and mother’s tiny, narrow bird-bosoms (high even at their ages) heaved in the same indignant rhythm.

I was named after Elocutionary Florence of the slim hands. Florence Willis I was born, and for the past 30 years, thanks to Tyson Roland my late beloved husband and the father of my five girls, I've been Florence Roland. A name neither usual nor unusual. Some of the reading public in this area know the name; I was the state's Poet Laureate for a triple term, nine years, and after my next-to-last book, *death trip life*, won the Pulitzer, there's been a little bit of talk about featuring my face one of those limited edition postage stamps. There's something sentimental going on in the Federal government, or whoever thinks of the faces for stamps, regarding poets—Langston Hughes, Ogden Nash, Edgar Allan Poe as I recall. I wonder what the other Florence Roland would think about a Florence Roland stamp.

The other Florence Roland gets an undisclosed amount of my mail. It is she who won't disclose it, much less turn the mail over to me. I've asked her to many times and in many ways, though never in the one way that might actually force her at least to respond, if only with a look in the eye, a twitch of the cheek. One day or night I'll do it. I'll simply pause during a reading, look up from my manuscript, and, in my clearest public voice, address these words to the pale immobile face always in the middle of the back row of the hall: *Please, I beg you, give me my mail.*

The pale face used to be huge, bloated-looking, a moon full of pus. It unnerved me when it started showing up at every public performance I gave. This was decades ago, the seventies-eighties. Most of my listeners reacted with laughter or head nods or the occasional semi-embarrassed "Amen." The moon-face never flickered eye or lip. That's

why one afternoon in the late 1980's or so, I sent the manager of Gordon's Booksellers to find out who the face belonged to. The manager came back shaking his head. "She says her name is Florence Roland."

I realized she must be the person the Post Office had delivered my 1989 tax bill to by mistake. I am Florence Roland of Arbutus Avenue. She is Florence Roland of Arbor Court. My neighborhood mail carrier told me he noticed the mistake and re-routed the bill, which meant taking it back to the post office branch and re-logging it and sending it on its way again. It took so long to get back into the hopper I was late paying my income tax for the one and only time in my life.

At Gordon's I tried to shove my way through the folding chairs, but Madame Moon-face disappeared before I could get to her.

Soon after that, when *Aubergine* came out and started getting good reviews, this cryptic item arrived in my mail, typed on a three-by-five index card in the dainty Elite font of an old-fashioned manual typewriter (I could tell by the variegations in ink caused by uneven pressure on the keys):

Thou thinkest thou art queen, O Augergine.

But shinier, more dark, are often seen.

Oh my. At the time I taught “Form and Tradition in Western Poetry” at Towson University, where I still hold a part-time poet-in-residence appointment, and I felt as if Alexander Pope had popped out of a fortune cookie. The closed couplet was perfect, despite or perhaps even because of the internal rhyme in line one.

Moon-pie (I’m going to call her MP for short) showed up at the back of the Lyric Theatre for the reading that launched *Aubergine*. At that point I had hit what, for a poet in this city, is the Big Time. Bobby McFerrin, in town to perform with the Baltimore Symphony, did a 10-minute *a capella* number to introduce me. MP was back for my reading at the Maryland Institute of Art the following week; it was daytime, and the sun was in her face. During the long moment at the end when the lights were coming up and the applause was dying, I saw the pursy lips mouth the *aubergine/seen* couplet. I saw too that the full moon was waning to gibbous. The big face seemed to be deflating like a leftover balloon. Balloon-like, it floated right out of the hall, out of my reach.

I was totally unprepared for the article that appeared in THE SUN not long after *Aubergine*’s release. In it I was quoted at length saying that this book marked the last of my free verse works, that I was sorry about paying so little attention to rhyme and meter, and that my next work would include sonnets. THE SUN quoted the end of a sonnet in progress:

. . .so that however slight my mortal flesh,
our souls as marbled meat will surely mesh.

Of course I phoned THE SUN immediately and learned, or rather informed them, that the Florence Roland they'd interviewed was the Arbor Court Roland, definitely not the author of *Aubergine*. At my demand, the newspaper acknowledged the error.

Unfortunately they did so in a small box on p. 2. I had requested and, indeed, expected, a full-blown follow-up article exposing the impostor on the front of the Maryland section.

Privately I had to acknowledge that MP's sonnet ended with a pretty good couplet. She appeared to be influenced by the Metaphysicals as well as the Elizabethan and Augustan poets. On an impulse I wrote to her Arbor Court address and asked her if I could see a copy. My letter wasn't meant to be a trap, though I admit I did hope that establishing a poet-to-poet relationship might revise our non-contactive yet combative relationship.

What I really wanted to know was what form of sonnet it was. It sounded John-Donne-like and Petrarchan in tone, yet the couplet end would be typical of the Shakespearean form. I wondered if I should look up the rhyme scheme of the George Mason sonnet (George Mason being the only signer of the Declaration of Independence who went into Liberal Arts instead of politics) and recommend that MP enter the following year's George Mason Sonnet Competition. MP did not reply to my query.

"Slight my mortal flesh indeed"—my sixtieth birthday saw me weighing what I'd weighed at sixteen and at twenty-six. Women in my audiences no longer chuckled at poems expressing my bony shame, my sense of being too skinny to be a woman. Even when I wrote a poem about how a thin black woman's knees and elbows develop a gray

elephant-hide callus, they heard my poems lamenting my fleshiness as some kind of bragging.

Meanwhile, mid-back row, during the spate of readings I gave focusing on the series of Caribbean slave histories that culminated in *death trip life*, MP's round mounds of flesh were steadily eroding. It was as if somebody had stuck a straw into that fat-squeezed mouth and sucked out a quart of liquid fat. Liposuction of the head. The thought is sickening, but the result was aesthetically pleasing. MP's features—a tiny hook nose, hawklike; a plump heart-shaped mouth; two dark eyes no longer resembling raisins stuck into dough--were gradually revealed. I considered telling her how well she was looking; perhaps that was the way to make contact. But she had taken to leaving before the lights came up.

I can't remember precisely when my eldest daughter got the first phone call. A voice appeared on her answering machine in high clear syllables: *Do not forget your mother*. The same voice enunciated the same sentence and immediately hung up on several occasions when Flo-Mae answered the ring. The voice had to be MP's. Flo-Mae began screening all calls. The message was repeated on the answering machine half a dozen times.

About this time I began getting rather surprising messages on my own answering machine. "Unable to reach you for comment. . . ." "Had been expecting you to reply by mail, but feel we must take the liberty of phoning you. . . ." "Regret you were unable to

appear. . . .” “Prize will be awarded in absentia. . . .” “Perhaps you are traveling. . . .” “Perhaps you are ill. . . .” Some of these callers began tracking down my daughters and leaving messages on their answering machines as well.

“For godsake, Mama, answer these people’s letters!” Flo-Mae and her sisters begged. That was when I had to face two facts: one, the Pulitzer meant that Florence Roland was becoming a public figure of sorts; and two, I was going to have to take steps to re-establish myself as Pulitzer Florence. I wasn’t altogether sorry about not getting the invitations and awards the usurped mail must have been importuning me to accept. But the matter wasn’t about my work alone any more. It was about my family.

Luckily MP didn’t know as much about my family as she may have thought she did. When a letter arrived addressed to my late beloved husband Tyler, enclosing a man’s handkerchief embroidered with initials that might or might not have been “TR” in some fancy script, of course it was I that opened and read it. I considered answering the letter. It had demanded to know why Tyler was shutting his true love out of his life. I kept the handkerchief and mentally composed a little gem of understatement mentioning that he had been dead for fifteen years.

She, “shut out.” He, shut up in a box. There was a poem in that. Instead of writing to Florence Roland, I began to write the poem. It resisted the voice of my books. I had not written iambics since I took a college course called “Experiments in the Traditional Forms,” but iambic tetrameter lines like these came out, unbidden:

*You shut me out, beloved. Why?
Is the box more fine and private than
the place where we made love, made all
our children? Yes, perhaps it is
less noisy, more serene. But cold,
my darling, cold and dark. No love-
light beams where now you lie.
You lie! you know you love me still. . . .*

I tried to remember that I was the ‘I’ and the “me’ of the poem. As it grew into a multi-page, multi-sectioned poem, the longest single poem I’d ever written, I tried to hear my alto voice, see my long, thin, dark purple lips shaping the words. The tendency to hear them in high tones emanating from a plump pink heart-shape distressed me.

“Distress’ took on a much stronger meaning when my middle daughter, Clara Jean, phoned one day to say a tan Lincoln town car had been following Markesha, her youngest, home from elementary school all week. Now, MP’s belief that she was me: awkward but basically manageable. Her belief that she was Tyson’s true love: almost funny, considering. But if she believed she was Markesha’s grandmother, that was truly frightening. Clara Jean gave Markesha an updated version of the “never get in anybody’s car” talk, of course, and in fact neither she nor Markesha noticed the Lincoln again

anyway. I alerted Flo-Mae, Eleanor, Mary Grace, and Anabelle to re-up the lecture with their respective children, just in case.

A poem about a woman's hunger for children began taking shape in my head. Though I wrote about my five girls, their husbands and their combined total of fifteen children so often they all claimed to be embarrassed, I had certainly never explored anything to do with childlessness. Well, there are several poems in *death trip life* spoken by slave women mourning lost children, but really those poems are about being mothers, not about *not* being mothers. For obvious reasons, childlessness was not a condition that had ever occurred to me at all, much less as a subject to write about. Now lines like these started coming:

*Brown as leaves these breasts, these empty bags of
nothing but myself, my thinning solitary
body. . . .*

What would it have been like, I wondered, if my thin self were further thinned, thinned out to the point of vanishing, by not having managed to reproduce itself five times, fifteen times? If the question had any answers, they arrived packaged in trochees. The words seemed to come from a self that had been folded and tucked under the one who had been writing my poems since I left college.

The thin, dark, bespectacled, prim-skirt-and-blouse-wearing self, the teenage Florence who had been one of Goucher College's first three Negroes, had suddenly taken charge. I was filled with admiration for her courage. I recalled how she had been laughed at by her classmates in the segregated public schools where her bookishness and her vocabulary of big words earned her the epithet 'Stuck-Up,' the nickname Miss Priss. It was at all-white Goucher that I taught myself how to talk like a Negro. It was a safe place to learn. My classmates couldn't tell when I got the words and rhythms wrong. Most of the time, neither could I.

My publisher at the LSU Press (for some reason the Johns Hopkins Press, till recently, wouldn't touch my work) didn't like the new pieces. She said, correctly, that their texture and tone were jarring in the context of my usual style. She grudgingly okayed their being sandwiched into the middle of the two main sections of my forthcoming book, the way Robert Lowell's prose autobiography is squashed between "Life Studies" and "For the Union Dead" in one of his collections. I borrowed—no, stole—the title of a Hans Christian Anderson story, "What the Moon Saw," for the rhyme-and-meter section of "You/Go." Fair is fair! I knew Moon Pie had inspired it. But the editor changed the section's title to "Brown Leaves."

"You/Go" came out this past March. You may have heard of it. It was featured on one of the Oprah Winfrey book shows. My LSU publisher had foreseen how the blatant allusion to Oprah's "You go, girl!" would get the book noticed by Oprah's people. It's a shame my mother, who always said Oprah was a very intelligent woman and a lady

besides, never got to see the show aired. But I did get to wheel Mother into Towson University's mahogany-panelled Stephens Hall to hear me read at the book's launching. Mother died the following Wednesday. I am convinced she permitted her spirit to leave this world once she heard that her namesake, her daughter, her sweet inexplicable Florence, was headed down the right path at last.

In Stephens Hall, I read "Brown Leaves" in its entirety, and nothing else. The audience didn't know what to make of it. My mother beamed. It was the only time since I was a small girl in patent leather Mary Janes that I can recall my mother poking strangers' arms to the right and left of her, stage-whispering, "That's my daughter."

I received a good bit of mail after the launch reading, some praising the new style but most of it vituperating loud outrage that I had "abandoned my roots." Honestly, the clichés in those letters—it's a good thing the other Florence probably got the bulk of them. The one interesting item came, of course, from the other Florence. Out of a plain business-size envelope fell a single sheet of typing paper. On it, in the manual typescript that was as idiosyncratic and recognizable as handwriting, appeared a poem that began thus:

*You—Girl-- You think you got it going,
think you snowing the crowd out loud witcha poem. . .*

I had to read it at full voice several times before I got the rhythm and rhymes right.

You---Girl--- you think you got it GO en,
think---you---SNOWWWWW en
the crowd
out loud
wit cha PO em. . . .

Blues and rap have so little in common. I had to adjust. Once I did, ‘going’ and ‘poem’ rhymed fine. Of its kind, MP’s latest was not to be maligned. (O, the addictive powers of rhyme!)

Enough nonsense. The fact is that MP hasn’t been attending my post “You/Go” readings; I’m disappointed, and also, to tell the truth, a bit worried. Once again, I’m thinking about writing to her. I am both eager and trepidatious to see her in the middle of the last row. At Borders Books not long ago, I thought I saw her standing in back of a free-standing, life-sized cardboard cut-out depicting me holding my latest. The cut-out hid her completely. How thin has she become? Is she getting thinner still? Did she read these lines from my new book, and, if so, what did she make of them:

Studying my scar in the mirror
fat black line zig-zagged
across my flat brown chest
I think of the old Bible lines

I hum Rock my soul

in the bosom of Abraham

I think how brown, flat and sere

that bosom must have been

A huge question trembles with dactyls: How many breasts has my namesake today?
