

Three Poems: ‘Charleena Chavon Lyles’, ‘Spotted Owl’, ‘Economics’

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Abstract

This collection of poems is based in working-class life through an intersectional lens on the west coast of the US. It includes a documentary poem to a young Black woman, Charleena Chavon Lyles, who has been eulogized by the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement in Seattle. It draws on news articles and an obituary to support its truth claims and aims to counter the official police report and support the global, working class, BLM movement. ‘Spotted Owl’ is a poem that talks back to the opposition between loggers and the forest, in part from the point of view of an old growth tree. It highlights the intimate relationship between trees and owls and between blue-collar workers who directly work with natural resources and the environment. ‘Economics’ is about work beyond capitalism, through a focus on the relationship between bees and a chaste tree and the Irish word for labor, saothar. In sum, these poems address the lived experience of class through the author’s vantage at this place and time, from the US west coast.

To access sound files for each poem, please click the poem titles.

Charleena Chavon Lyles (1987-2017)

lived from zero to thirty years old and had four children and a bean
in her tummy, a girl and a boy 12 and 11, a girl 4 and another boy 1,
expecting the next at 14 weeks gestated

she was from washington and lived lots in kent and seattle,
sometimes without a home with her brood to tend and defend
and her own self at 110 pounds and 5' 3 inches of formidable size

sometimes she wore yellow earrings and blouse by backyard roses
and smiled for the picture taker at barbecue, ate potato chips
and ribs and tropical punch, kids run plopping in blowup pool

she was a poet her obituary says, and survivor of personal
violence from former boyfriend father of youngest two, she
beseeched the state and police for protection she tried

the mental health court of the mind and they said they might

take her children away, in buried bureaucracy white paper
factory billowing sheets to foster care fathers seeking meat

feast paid stipend to eat, you *kkk devils*, she called cops,
there was a breach, I can shapeshift to she *wolf and so can my children*
we wish, tracers zinging off police as they enter and break

historical warbles of lynching and rape and stripping and take
howling with the moon at her back when nobody came human
to help her defend so she charged them with kitchen knife

and they shot her seven times, how dare she challenge
our cauc-assed statures in badges and boots
they asked with their eyes, and just like Custer they killed her

with the little ones near, saw the whole thing and heard it
still their reporting calls children in mother's blood
officially *unharmd*, just read the police report

credible news, incredible killings of Black beauties in sun
a golden one and her littles, we, american kin, reckon the sin
so the healing can begin

Spotted Owl

Wipe Your Ass with a Spotted Owl bumper stickers say
on log trucks burling down Yelm Highway,
strands of hairy bark bounce by on bodies
chained and girded to flatbed fierce,
heft padded by leather wrapped hands
crank pullied skin to skin jam,
torsos severed from roots and limbs
circles story years of life

and when you were alive like mountain
did a pair of eyes abysmal find a nook
like the crook between shoulder and neck
to paw and coo, did you shelter

owl mates, homebodies who batten down for life
return to one nest in one tree in one old growth forest
one wife one husband three sheep-looking children
meat-eaters quiet-types work nights

choker setter, you learned to do it young
set cables hard fast get back
in cedar breath and miles of cloud
back in living room, kids bickering
for who gets to pull boots off,
charcoaled x's to logging socks,
crisscrossed by cork and thread

and for dinner she makes you all biscuits and stew
your body twisted and wrung
she tenders and hugs you
like environmentalists trees do
home makes you right and before light
corrected and clean with thermos of black cream

there is paper there is dream
what we produce and what we cannot claim,
thick trees hung with mighty limbs
speak creaks to wind, never mind
banshee blister scream
or blade-line birds of prey on duty
you steady you sustain, cradling
babes in egg of spotted owl

economics

bear bees love to eat buds of violet chaste tree
they work from sun to sun, like human men
*man works from sun to sun but a woman's work
a woman's work is never done*

their black rotunds buzz and reverberate
waddling leaves and stalks of flower
don't mind the 108 degree heat
know how to get 'er done

and the queen, massive reproduction
so many pollen suckers necessary
and there is no temporary Labor Ready,
different kind of work between tree and bee

sensuous tie, communion with no big god
or corporation between them- a *saothar*,
an abundant work in which

the makers bear the fruits
and there is no stripping away
or depletion

even the hens in the morning want
to keep their small warm eggs
when they are not made a trade
like gold dust for berry

Author Bio

Jen Vernon is a poet, performance researcher, and community college professor where she teaches communication studies and journalism. She was awarded a ‘Tillie Olsen’ from the Working-Class Studies Association for her book *Rock Candy*, (West End press, 2009) in 2010. She lives with her little family in Folsom, California.

Thanks to Charles Callan of the Irish Labour History Society and their journal, *Saothar*