

AFRICA FINE

COLORED

The two girls came to symbolize everything Jackson Tupper hated about the world—and himself. They'd sauntered into his freshman composition class as if they owned the room, although it was just the start of the semester and hierarchies had yet to be established.

The two looked nothing alike—one was tall, pale, and willowy, with long curly brown hair that she wore in cornrows one day and piled atop her head in a purposefully messy ponytail the next. The other was smaller and full-breasted, with shoulder-length blond hair courtesy of the best salon her parents could afford (which Jackson presumed wasn't a terribly upscale place, judging from the slightly brassy look of her hair). They both wore glasses, which surprised him; the sweet scent of their vanity wafted into the room just before them, and vanity seemed to demand contact lenses.

They looked nothing alike, and yet, he could not tell them apart. One was never seen without the other, and they operated as a single unit, wearing the same petulant expressions on their faces, writing in the same fat, girlish hand, earning the same sub-par grades on their papers. Their names were Tricia and Kelly. Or Kelly and Tricia. It took Jackson no time to learn their names, since he hated them on sight, but in four months, he hadn't been able to discern which was Kelly and which was Tricia. Since they wrote equally poorly, distinguishing them as individuals had not become necessary, and he was glad, for he thought this would limit the amount of attention he needed to pay to the girls. He told himself that he'd rather not think of the girls at all.

He never felt guilty about hating Kelly and Tricia; he knew by the way they slouched in their seats, by the glare in their eyes when he lectured, by the stubborn stiffness of their torsos, that they hated him, too. In a paper discussing a Richard Wright short story, one of them had referred to blacks as "coloreds" no fewer than thirty-seven times.

"They're doing this to deliberately disrespect me," Jackson told his girlfriend, Melinda, waving the offending paper in the warm

kitchen air.

Melinda shook her head and tasted the pesto she was making, adding more salt, too much salt, he suspected.

“She’s just eighteen, right? She probably doesn’t know any better,” she said calmly, tossing bangs out of her face. Melinda wore her chestnut hair in a chin-length bob, and when they first met one of things Jackson had liked about her was the way she tossed it out of her eyes. But today, the gesture just annoyed him.

“Mel, come on—it’s the year 2000. No one says ‘colored’ anymore. They’re doing it because I’m black.”

He was frustrated that he was endlessly pointing out obvious examples of racism to her. Yes, she was Irish Catholic and had never dated a black man before him, but he was certain she must have learned *something* about the world in all those sociology classes she took at Columbia.

“That’s silly. Why would a student do this just to antagonize you?” She smiled at him and turned back to the pesto.

He fumed. Why? Why do students always have “printer problems” the day papers are due? Why do they have the grammar skills of third graders? Why do they think that taking their cousins to the airport is a valid excuse for missing class? No professor knows *why* they do what they do—none of it ever makes sense. What Jackson wanted to know was why Melinda was too dense to realize this.

“Racism isn’t rational, Mel.” He filled his voice with as much condescension as possible.

Melinda looked at him, one of her perfectly plucked eyebrows delicately raised. “She’s just a kid, Jackson.”

“So it’s okay for her to call black people colored? How about coons? Jungle bunnies? Niggers?” he spat.

She rolled her eyes. “You’re being melodramatic.”

“You’re being naive.” He snatched up the paper and stormed into his office. After scratching a “D” onto the paper and writing a nasty note about the word colored in the margin, Jackson sat back in his leather chair and took a deep breath.

He retreated to his office increasingly often these days. When he’d bought this house as a junior professor just out of Princeton, this room had been a nursery. The previous owners had several young children, the baby still in diapers when they left Connecticut for Florida. They’d left their crumbling two-story colonial to

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Jackson, who'd immediately become the talk of the neighborhood by converting the garage into a home gym. The only change he'd made to the inside of the house was this room, his office, the former nursery. He was twenty-seven at the time with no intention of having children (he found them messy and noisy and inconvenient), so he transformed this room into the private sanctuary he'd always dreamed of growing up in a crowded Brooklyn apartment with five sisters.

He had an obsession with light that dominated the room. The walls were eggshell, decorated only by bookshelves and a succession of framed degrees from increasingly elite schools. He'd chosen the palest oak he could find for his expansive desk, which held nothing but a neat stack of composition papers to be graded and a tin container of Bic pens, all black, all medium point. Two of the walls were lined with built-in oak shelves that reached the ceiling, and these shelves he'd filled with every textbook he'd ever used in graduate school and his favorite novels, which tended toward the tragic and the grotesque. He had a fascination with the underbelly of the human psyche and hated happy endings.

The flooring was a dark wood, but he'd covered most of it with an antique white rug that caressed his bare feet when he sat at his desk. The windows lined another wall and bore no coverings; he'd paid extra for special glass that kept prying eyes out and let in the sun and moonlight. A small genuine Tiffany lamp was the most luxurious item in the room—he'd considered overhead lighting but hated the unnatural feel of fluorescents—and he'd placed a 150-watt halogen bulb in it to supply enough light to banish shadows from the corners.

Melinda had called the office spartan and cold when she moved in eleven months ago; in response he'd banned her from the room. There had been a big argument, and although they'd eventually made up, he never invited her into his office and she never went in, not even to clean. Melinda didn't work and was still finishing her dissertation (in fact, she had been a student in a Faulkner seminar he taught two years ago), so she did most of the housework. Jackson hired a maid to come once a week solely to clean his office, because the thing he hated almost as much as darkness was dirt.

This was where he came when Dean Whitman chastised him for publishing a pornographic short story under his real name. This

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is where he came to silently bemoan his punishment for that offense—teaching a section of freshman composition, a thankless task usually reserved for graduate students and professors with no clout. This was where he came to fume about students who used the word “colored” in their papers. This was where he came to wonder whether he was beginning to hate Melinda.

Jackson sighed and closed his eyes, his toes digging into the rug. Their meeting and eventual relationship was just short of a cliché, saved only by the fact that he’d waited until the day after the Faulkner seminar ended to sleep with her. Technically, she was no longer his student at the time, and he chose to ignore the implications of a thirty-four-year-old tenure track professor sleeping with a doe-eyed Ph.D. candidate who seemed even younger than her twenty-three years. He’d never been certain why she loved him; he loved her because she asked difficult questions and had a deep, raucous laugh.

They’d dated for about a year, then he took her home to Brooklyn on one of his reluctant family visitations. His parents and sisters all lived within miles of each other, and none of them had ever even considered going to college. Only he, the baby of the family, had left the nest.

They had all been exceedingly polite to Melinda, who’d complimented his mother on the appearance of the apartment even though he saw his childhood home as impossibly shabby and poor. He’d been embarrassed for Melinda to see that he’d grown up in a home with no books, with a father who was a garbage man and a mother who worked as a maid for Upper Eastside snobs. He would have preferred that Melinda not meet his sisters, who were all just months apart in age and led similarly depressing lives—all overweight, all divorced, all with children in various stages of adolescent rebellion. He had little in common with them, and when he was a boy, they’d looked at him as if he were some strange creature who needlessly ruined his eyesight reading thick books instead of playing basketball with the other boys. Now, accustomed to his oddness, they welcomed his rare visits for pure entertainment value. Every time he came home, Jackson got into an argument with his father, usually over politics. His father was a Republican, a fact that Jackson found inexplicable and horrifying. He believed that any black man who voted Republican was either self-hating, ignorant, or both, and it disturbed him to think that he

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might have these genes running through his own veins. None of the women in his family voted, so they just laughed at these recurrent political battles; Jackson found them painful. He couldn't tell how his father felt; his father was notoriously difficult to rattle, holding his emotions at arm's length while using logic and reason to infuriate Jackson.

The family had loved Melinda, maybe because they'd never known him to bring home a girlfriend. He suspected they'd made bets on whether or not he was gay.

"She's sweet. Brainy, just like you," his mother said.

"She's cute for a white girl," his sisters said.

"Marry her," his father grunted.

At the time, Jackson had no intentions beyond discussing literature with Melinda and having sex with her at every opportunity, but his father seemed to know something Jackson didn't. Soon after the Brooklyn visit, Melinda had moved in, began washing his clothes and cooking his meals, and marriage no longer seemed like such a far-fetched idea.

But now, eleven months later, Jackson was irritated by the very sound of Melinda's breathing as they drifted off to sleep at night, and he had no idea why.

"Jackson?" Melinda's voice came cracking over the intercom. The previous owners had installed the intercom system, and Jackson often amused himself by imagining them communicating only through stinky radio transmissions.

He considered ignoring her call, but he suddenly felt an unfamiliar urge to smooth things over. He walked over to the intercom near the door and pressed the talk button.

"Yes?"

"Can you come out? I need to talk to you about something."

He gave the office the once over to make sure everything was in place before clicking off the light and opening the door. Melinda stood in the darkened hallway, holding a thick white candle and wearing just the briefest pair of bikini panties. She flipped her hair and smiled at him, then turned to walk toward their bedroom. He hesitated a moment, then followed her. They didn't say another word the entire night.

* * *

There were several more failing grades before Kelly and Tricia

came to see Jackson in his campus office in early November. As much as he loved his home office, that's how much he hated his campus office. It was bland and anonymous and dark. There were no windows, and the tiny space was claustrophobic. Still, he held court here with an air of authority that he rarely felt. Students came here to gain favor, to argue over grades, to find out how they could pass the class (most times, he found that students who asked him that question couldn't possibly get a pass unless they suddenly became someone else).

Today, it was Kelly and Tricia. He always liked to guess what students wanted before they spoke. Today, he guessed, it would be the "I've never gotten a 'D' before in my life so it must be you" argument.

Although they'd both gotten the same grades, only one of them wanted to discuss these grades with him; the other, he presumed, was just there for moral support.

"What do *you* think the problem is?" he asked with the most concern he could muster. He watched as Kelly/Tricia rolled her eyes slightly.

"I read your comments. I fix whatever you tell me to, and I'm still getting bad grades, so I don't know what the problem is," she whined.

He figured it must gall her to have to come to him to plead her case. At some point it must have occurred to her that this colored man controlled her GPA and whether she'd have to retake Composition I.

He intended to enjoy the moment for as long as possible. "So I'm the one with the problem, not you?" He smiled at her, watching her mind switch gears as she backpedaled. Mustn't make the colored man too angry.

"I just don't think you understand my writing style. English was my best subject in high school."

I understand it perfectly, he thought. It's middle-school level crap, and you've been getting away with it because other teachers fell for your charms or simply didn't have the energy to try to fix the mountain of errors you make on every paper.

To keep from laughing, he flipped through his grade book as if it would reveal new information.

"What I'm seeing . . . is that you're not fully understanding what I'm asking you to do," he said, wondering if she noticed the

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pause where her name belonged. He had a fifty percent chance of getting it right, but getting it wrong would make him look bad, and he wanted to maintain the upper hand.

Using his most condescending tone, he explained where she had gone wrong on this and every paper and encouraged her to keep trying, fully confident that she'd never be able to cobble together a coherent essay. Jackson had pegged her as a "D" student, and he had no expectations that she would prove him wrong.

She nodded seriously at everything he said. The conference was finished, and there was an awkward silence as she stood to leave. He knew she didn't want to thank him, that she'd rather do anything than admit that she needed him to help her. Finally she smiled weakly, averted her eyes, and muttered thanks as she slipped out the door with her friend right behind her.

* * *

Jackson and Melinda were much nicer to each other. The sex they'd shared acted as a truce, a truce that he suspected was only temporary. He complimented her on her cooking even when the recipes were bland, and he told her she looked nice on those days she came to school to meet with her dissertation committee. She listened to him patiently when he told her about the formal complaints both Kelly and Tricia lodged with the dean. Melinda assured him he was a fair teacher, that Dean Whitman would surely see that their claims were without merit. He let her rub his shoulders at night, even when he didn't want to be touched. They passed weekends quietly, both afraid that too much talking might ruin the truce.

Exams were over, and Jackson sat in his campus office on a Monday afternoon, calculating final grades and counting down the hours until he'd be free, at least for Christmas and New Year's. Looking up periodically at his dismal surroundings, he could sense the nearly imperceptible loosening of his shoulders, the smoothing of the brow that felt permanently furrowed during the semester.

He had just five more papers to read when Dean Whitman walked into his office without knocking. Jackson felt his shoulders retightening as he gazed into Whitman's eyes. He and the dean had never been friends; they merely tolerated each other out of obligation. Whitman had voted against Jackson's appointment to

the department years ago but was overruled by his own boss, the college dean who was under pressure to add diversity to his homogenous staff.

Whitman's tolerant attitude diminished each year as it became increasingly apparent that Jackson did not embrace the traditional trappings of academia, trappings the dean worshipped. Before the most recent flap over Jackson's pornographic story and the student complaints, there had been a series of smaller incidents and characteristics Whitman didn't approve of. There was Jackson's relationship with Melinda, of course, which pressed against the boundaries of professional decorum. There was the fact that Jackson had no friends, personal nor professional, and seemed to like it that way since he declined invitations to all department social events. And there was his wardrobe, which tended toward dark, expensive suits and designer ties.

"Jack, you look like you're going to work on Wall Street, not at a university," the Dean had joked to him early on.

Jackson had smiled slightly, still new enough to be polite but not so new as to completely hide behind the smile.

"It's Jackson," he'd reminded the dean, who'd given his own tight smile before turning and leaving.

He knew that his appearance, his behavior, his essence offended Whitman. Anyone passing the dean on the street would know he was a professor, an academic of some ilk. He wore ancient, well-crafted blazers and kept his curly, salt-and-pepper hair a bit too long at the back and sides, as if literature so consumed him that he had no time for regular haircuts. With his blazers Whitman wore faded jeans, white button-down shirts and wacky purple ties, as if to prove his supposed hipness. He always carried a battered leather satchel stuffed with books, although his duties were primarily administrative. Small wire-rimmed glasses completed the look. He preferred to peer over them, and it wouldn't have surprised Jackson to learn that the lenses weren't required by prescription.

He put down his pen and sat back in his chair. "Dean. What can I do for you?"

Whitman stepped to the front of Jackson's desk and looked down at him.

"About Ms. King and Ms. McCall. . ." Whitman stopped short at the frown on Jackson's face.

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“Who?”

“*Kelly King and Tricia McCall.*”

“Oh. Yes?” Jackson shuffled the papers on his desk impatiently, hoping Whitman would get the point that he was busy, too busy to talk about some ridiculous complaint. He knew it wasn’t politically keen to rush a dean from his office, especially considering that he was already on shaky ground, but he didn’t have much left to lose. He was doomed to the purgatory of teaching composition again in the spring, and Whitman already disliked him. No sense prolonging the unpleasant.

But Whitman would not be rushed. He folded his arms across his chest and reiterated the girls’ complaints. Unfair grading. Not enough guidance in or out of class. Critical, negative attitude.

Keeping his eyes trained on Whitman’s face, Jackson tuned him out, thinking of Christmas and how he might avoid a visit to his family, wondering what gift would satisfy Melinda but promise little. He tuned back in as the Dean got to the part about how he’d read the girls’ papers, how Jackson was being too hard on them (they were only freshmen, after all), how he wanted Jackson to give them both a “C” for the class and apologize.

He raised his eyebrows. “Apologize?” Jackson didn’t really care about the grades, although he suspected that Dean Whitman wasn’t nearly as offended at the term “colored” as he should have been. But apologize to those girls, whose disdain for him was barely concealed?

“Yes, Jackson. Apologize and this whole thing goes away.” Whitman smiled, as if congratulating himself.

Jackson glanced down at his desk briefly then looked back up at Whitman. “You’re serious.”

He nodded. “I’ll expect your grade sheets accompanied by a written apology,” he said on his way out the door. “Tomorrow,” he added, looking back at Jackson over his glasses.

The “or else” was left unsaid, and Jackson didn’t bother to ask. It wasn’t grounds for firing, but add it to the other evidence against him and it would make things very difficult for him indeed.

* * *

Jackson spent that evening alone. Melinda was having dinner with her graduate school friends, and she was gone by the time he got home. She hadn’t invited Jackson since he’d refused all

previous invitations. He didn't have friends and had reached the point in his life when people stopped trying to be friendly. When he was a child, the other kids didn't understand him. When he was a teen, he didn't understand his peers. As an adult, he'd convinced himself that he hated people, and they seemed to return the sentiment.

Ordinarily, this didn't bother him; he told himself that friends made life more complicated. But the night he received the ultimatum from the dean, a small part of him wished he did have friends, one friend really, a friend who would be indignant on his behalf, a friend who would laugh at his description of Whitman, a friend who would counsel him gently but wisely. For Jackson knew that he had an opportunity here, one that might never come along again. Dean Whitman had unknowingly given him a way out, a way to change, a way to find something beyond the small life he'd crafted for himself. Maybe he wouldn't apologize, and he'd let Whitman use it to run him out of the department. Maybe he'd move, somewhere warm, and maybe he'd bring Melinda with him. Maybe they would marry and have kids who would fill their home with noise and dirt and laughter. Maybe this is what people did, denying the claustrophobia of marriage, quashing the salty taste of doubt on their tongues. Maybe loving and hating Melinda was normal. Maybe he could be something different, someone different, even at not-yet-forty. Maybe it wasn't too late.

It was after midnight when Melinda came home. Jackson was awake, anxious to reveal the ideas swirling in his mind. But she spoke before he did.

"I have to talk to you," she said, not waiting for a response before she continued.

"I'm leaving you." She went on to list the reasons, but Jackson didn't listen because he knew them well. He simply sat, watching her as she tossed her bangs out of her face, nonsensically thinking of a pair of red boots she'd worn to the Faulkner seminar each week. He wondered what ever happened to the boots; she hadn't worn them since the class ended.

He said nothing when she finally paused for a response, said nothing while she methodically packed her suitcases, said nothing as she dragged them down to her car. He said nothing when she lingered in the doorway, wanting to say a goodbye that could never encompass the two years of life they'd shared. He said nothing as

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he stood by the bedroom window and watched her car disappear down the street.

Just that quickly, Melinda, who had been his now and perhaps his future, became a part of his past. He marveled at the simplicity of it, how the relationship had become a memory before her scent left the room. Jackson wished he were more imaginative so he could picture the life Melinda would create for herself, the husband she would take, the books she would write. He felt as if he should mourn the fact that he would never see her crooked smile, that he would never touch that soft white spot just above her hipbone. Instead, he mourned the death of his hopes to be something different, someone different, even at not-yet-forty.

After a long while, Jackson went to his office and clicked on the lamp. Sitting at his desk, his feet buried in the rug, he picked up a pen and pad and wrote the first draft of his apology.

PETER MARCUS

LEAVING PARK STREET STATION

Heart-wrecked in a dismal year. Too many godless
Boston Sundays benched at the harbor's edge, waiting
for another tugboat's woeful moan, one more broken

vessel dragged in for repairs. In subway glass a ghostly
face appeared: crow-lines beneath the eyes, lips cracked
as the scales of a haddock. Deserted by words, I couldn't even

think the only thought worth thinking: how many fractures
can you endure before your mind is finely jig sawed?
Before dusk, I'd meander home through the narrow sidewalk

chatter of Portuguese and Haitians: neighbors, teenage lovers,
Big Wheels and ghetto blasters. Though sometimes in the twilight
I'd let myself go beyond the stop at Central Square, and ride

the T all the way to Alewife. Arriving at the end, almost calmed
by the steady, fluorescent hum. The last passenger sitting
in a vacant car, relieved at not having to go any farther.

PETER MARCUS

COURAGE

Youville Rehabilitation Hospital
Cambridge, MA.

All morning the white vans arrive with potted plants
and flowers. I feign having a relative here and tell
Reception I'm looking for my younger brother. *That kid*

*decked out in leather who flew like a giant bat above
the windscreen of his Harley and now can't make a fist
or talk.* Corridors of invalids re-learning how to walk

and swallow as O.T.s and P.T.s urge them on: *Just one
more step. . . . Lift your spoon.* How many heroes in this
one building? How many minds repeating, *why go on?*

SINTRA SUNDAY

All the parking spots are filled near the market, though
many have hobbled here with canes and metal walkers.

Strawberries piled high in boxes and garlic bulbs hang
in chains of fat white jewels. Fruition here even in winter.

Lemons fallen in the plaza tossed about by schoolboys.
And whenever the wind gusts, hams heavy as anvils sway

with a solemn cadence above the butcher's head.
I notice a crowd has gathered around a single cage.

It's reason enough to have come. Even though few
of us can afford the price for such a songbird.

SETH MICHAEL BERG

YOU LEFT ME

explaining why the lawn is spackled
with irregular flecks of mica,
luring you into stark, wet sleep.

No one notices your gushing sweat,
your trembling knees—
honestly, no one sees you
becoming a sick gem,

condemning the undrowsy books
singeing pockmarks in your backpack,
the somethings you will never open.

This is about the way you touched me,
the silhouette of your palm
on my face remaining.

SETH MICHAEL BERG

DISTANCE

Struggling to swim upstream,
a minnow flashes its underside,

a piece of submerged cutlery
suspended in the magic hour.

I want this jeweled relic
to be unamazing, to not hold

my attention like it now holds itself
in determined lateral sheen.

I tell myself to think of other things:
coins, mirrors, galaxies,

but the minnow flicks its tail
westward and snaps me back

into worshipping reflection,
back into standing still,

back into believing
we have the same face.

WALLY SWIST

NOVEMBER, THE ROBERT FRANCIS HOUSE

Cawing echoes from the rookery
in a century-old copper beech

a half mile into a grove of white pine.
Leaves clatter down over a shoal

of brook stones. Embers glimmer,
as we awaken, curled in an embrace,

having fallen asleep beside the hearth
to split cordwood in a roar of flames.

SMALL MIRACLES

for James Wright

Barn swallows, those dark handkerchiefs,
that drop from the sky and lift

again, find a place to perch,
then pause on the rim of a perfect arc.

What I do best is fly into
the eternity of an image like the cricket,

that black jewel, who
sings about nothing but this all night.

MARGOT SCHILPP

GHOST SHIPS

Or the decline of the Roman Empire
was a burlesque: the show you can't avoid,
the manner of speaking that wings its way

into the core of the apple, a reminder
of the balloon and the thistle, the down
comforter that drapes over the recklessness

I call my life: I am covered in the hues
of meaning, in the varied nuances
of septic tanks and swingsets.

And it's a different way of speaking: you can't
understand loss without losing something,
can't read a book in the dark. Open me

to any page and the words will look familiar:
I am no cipher, no puzzle, no babbling brook.
The ends of the chain provoke you

to connection, and that can't be
an accident, either, unless accident means
the will to explain is lost—why not

the beautiful words of desire to accompany
forgiveness and grief, or the everyday sounds
of dishes in the sink, the turnstile, the jet

engine? I could hear you over the din,
in the deepest cave, in the recesses of childhood,
those paths that foretold us.

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Here's truth in the sunset and a cold beer,
but it isn't the only truth: you want me
to be a riddle, but I am only a sum.

I am watching myself from the margins,
waiting for some cataclysm or sign—
you can't reach me from where you are,

and I can't answer the questions I pose,
but you can: how long will a cord of wood
last if no one tends the fire?

I'm thinking that the heart's orchestra
practices in middle age. And am I middle-aged
now, when I finally seem to walk inside

myself, to know the dangers of being
and having, of not doing and regrets?
The only harness in this world

is this sustained hearkening of the heart—
a witness and a key—where I am standing.
Which reminds me: stay. I know

the rule is to deny. I know the practice
is to pretend nothing happens, to force
out of the chambers a note that isn't heard

elsewhere. Yet the moss. Yet the swift crosses
the sky, a perfect geometry, an augmentation
of order. Don't reprimand me for not knowing,

for swallowing the truth whole—
you can't be here. What if we're ghost ships?
What if we sail right past each other?

MARGOT SCHILPP

COURTING THE HORIZON

It's a night to recall storms:
the way the gullies are rocked

with ice and wind, the hail
that dents cars and the matchsticks

striking at all odd hours,
when dusk hasn't fallen yet,

when the flame hardly matters,
though in the darkness—in absolute darkness—

it would, and would be a damn good thing,
too. Three-on-a-match was a no-no, too much

time for the enemy to sight and shoot,
though we can stand around on our corners

all day and take time to light things up—
even the canoes of memory that slur

out of the dimness require more
than matchlight to illuminate

the furthest corners of what happened
a year or two ago, or yesterday.

I wanted a little glamour,
and the morning toast's not the place

to find it, not unless the toast is encrusted
with diamonds and cut into the shape

of a crown, a Lamborghini, or the heart
of the woman who loves you. Maybe stillness

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causes these digressions while it exhibits
the patience of an old woman,

a pregnant cat, a lawyer
waiting for his money.

It's close to legend how the early signs
of falling out of something are a loss

of balance and a quick change of scene—
blink and you're somewhere else—

the circus, a strip joint, on the ground
in the alley behind Henri's Bistro.

Blink again and the horizon reconfigures,
which is something like what can happen

if you're not careful with your checkbook
or car maintenance or to whom you tell

the secrets of your past. That horizon
changes into a new vista

in which you must have faith—the old
one's gone and won't be returning,

the tides of regret or contentment
washing up every so slightly lower

each time you check, until they reach
their ebb. What if the only thing

keeping you from falling on purpose
is the current horizon, the one you know

and have come to truly rely on,
the one you can't let go of, yet?

GRACE CAVALIERI

THE POET AND THE POEM: AN INTERVIEW WITH LUCILLE CLIFTON

“The Poet and the Poem” radio series was recorded for broadcast at the Library of Congress. This program headlined the series and was distributed to public radio via NPR satellite in 2003. Producer/host Grace Cavalieri interviews Lucille Clifton, winner of the National Book Award for *Blessing the Boats, New and Selected poems 1988-2000*, BOA Editions Ltd. (2001).

CLIFTON: This opening poem is called “blessing the boats.”

(at St. Mary’s)

may the tide
that is entering even now
the lip of our understanding
carry you out beyond the face of fear
may you kiss
the wind then turn from it
certain that it will
love your back may you
open your eyes to water
water waving forever
and may you in your innocence
sail from this to that

CAVALIERI: Lucille Clifton was born in Depew, New York. She attended Howard University and State University of New York, Fredonia. Author of some eleven books of poetry . . .

CLIFTON: I think so.

CAVALIERI: . . . and lots of children’s books. In 1979, the Poet Laureate of Maryland and now holds a distinguished chair . . .

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CLIFTON: Chair of the Liberal Arts.

CAVALIERI: . . . at St. Mary's College, in southern Maryland. And you're putting that college on the map with a great poetry reading series.

CLIFTON: A small college, fifteen hundred students. I'm very proud of the variety of poets we have had, Adrienne Rich, Richard Wilbur, Gwendolyn Brooks, Derrick Wolcott, Galway Kinnell, Sharon Olds, Toni Morrison, dozens more. The series is called "Voices."

CAVALIERI: Well, we have been looking at your work for a number of years, and *Blessing the Boats* won the NBA, and maybe you will talk about the title poem.

CLIFTON: All right. It's interesting that "blessing the boats" was a poem that I didn't realize was so relevant to so many things. I've had people say they read it at weddings. I've had people say they read it at funerals. I understood the relevance, and it seems to have caught on.

CAVALIERI: Well, the poem itself is about movement. You end with a progression from having been somewhere to going somewhere. It is all about evolving, motion, and it is, of course, about blessings.

CLIFTON: Even the negative kind. I can understand the feeling that all the boats haven't been wonderful, but one appreciates them as part of life anyway.

CAVALIERI: And that's what your work is about, that is what *all* your work is about. These are "new and selected poems," and the present poem you're going to read. . . .

CLIFTON: This is a poem written to my youngest daughter when I had a kidney transplant. She donated her kidney to me, and what I think is interesting is this: I had six children in six and a half years, and she was the youngest, and she was the child I tried . . . I did quite a number of things to *not* have her . . . which she knows very

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well. I don't keep things like secrets from my children. And I did things that I say are still illegal. But, she was bound and determined to be born.

CAVALIERI: With the 'fierce frown of an angel.'

CLIFTON: Yes. And she said to me that if she had been able to talk, she would have said, "Give me thirty years, and you're gonna need me!"

CAVALIERI: And so you did.

CLIFTON: So I did. This is called "donor"

to lex.

When they tell me that my body
might reject
i think of thirty years ago
and the hangers i shoved inside
hard trying to not have you.

i think of the pills, the everything
i gathered against your
inconvenient bulge; and you
my stubborn baby child,
hunched there in the dark
refusing my refusal.

suppose my body does say no
to yours. again, again i feel you
buckled in despite me, lex,
fastened to life like the frown
on an angel's brow.

CAVALIERI: And she came in quite handy.

CLIFTON: And it's interesting, because people say, well do you love her more than you do the other children now? No! Not at all. It's not like that.

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CAVALIERI: Not about quantifying. And your work is, well, Faulkner says there's no such thing as "was," so your work is always about *all* time to me. It's about the past; it's about history; it's about family. It's not about chronology. It's always about right now. And that is the thing I think people and critics are saying about your work. Whatever you used to write is relevant now.

CLIFTON: I feel that nothing is lost, that history is still here, now. And the only way to deal with history, really, is to recognize that it is still part of us, which in our country we tend to not have done, as much as we might have. So much of American history is not validated, because it is seen sometimes as negative. I know there are negative things, but I think that we have to bless all the boats, as I said earlier.

CAVALIERI: Where shall we go now, Lucille? I was thinking: what might be the nouns that describe Lucille?

CLIFTON: Silly, is one.

CAVALIERI: That's an adjective. . . . Now let me see. Love. Is that a noun? History. Family.

CLIFTON: Family, very much. Woman.

CAVALIERI: Uterus—in several poems.

CLIFTON: Well, I'm the Queen of Body Parts! Yes, I feel that body parts are not celebrated enough. In our culture, we like to think that, oh I've said this before, and I hope it's not too risqué; it isn't risqué, it's human. But men have said to me, you write about body parts all the time! And I have said that if I had only one interesting one, I probably wouldn't write about it a lot either.

CAVALIERI: I have never heard that.

CLIFTON: But I have *many* interesting body parts, and I celebrate every single one.

CAVALIERI: Transformed to art.

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CLIFTON: I hope so. I'm a big woman, you know, and I celebrate that too.

CAVALIERI: What are the books that are compressed within this one volume?

CLIFTON: Well, I have a lot of books that talk about light. Lucille means light. I am very well aware of the fact that Lucille means light, and that Lucifer also means light. I try to be very aware of the Lucille in Lucifer. I try to be aware of the Lucifer in Lucille. And, he is there sometimes.

CAVALIERI: *Blessing the Boats* won the National Book Award, but *The Terrible Stories* was also nominated for the National Book Award. *The Book of Light*, which we just mentioned; *Quilting: Poems 1987-1990*; *Next*, which were new poems; *Good Woman*, which was poems and a memoir, and that was nominated for the Pulitzer; *Two-Headed Woman*, also nominated for the Pulitzer and a winner of the University of Massachusetts Press' Juniper Prize. Then there was *An Ordinary Woman*, *Good News About the Earth*, *Good Times*, oh also, *Generations: A Memoir*; and sixteen books for children.

CLIFTON: I think seventeen—or something like that. I should count. When I go home I'll count.

CAVALIERI: Please. Somebody's got to know. Because the Internet is inexact. I get different information every time I push up your name. Another poem, please.

CLIFTON: I was at one time Poet Laureate for the state of Maryland for several years. And I was asked, by Governor Harry Hughes at that time, if I would do a poem for the 350th anniversary of Maryland. And I thought that was very interesting, and it seemed to me that I ought to do that. But, the theme was "Our Happy Colonial Days," and I try very hard to be true to exactly who I am, and I am an African American woman who had . . . I sometimes joke and say . . . maybe one happy colonial day . . . probably during Christmas . . . I bet that was a nice day. But other than that, there weren't a lot. And yet I wrote a poem for the state,

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which I don't remember really, but I think it was not a bad poem. And I wrote one for me, and the one for me is called "why some people be mad at me sometimes."

they ask me to remember
but they want me to remember
their memories
and I keep on remembering
mine

And I think that is something that happens, you know.

CAVALIERI: I think that's a very good example of a poem of yours, because, above all, you are famous for the form you have, and it is compared to Emily Dickinson. It is spare, it is lean, it resonates, it leaves a residue, and it's yours. If ever a person had a voice, there is no mistaking Lucille Clifton. And I have determined that it's the way we pull energy through our body that makes the poem on the page; and that you pull energy exactly at the same rate of speed, every time, and it comes through you, and it lands exactly . . . there.

CLIFTON: I do believe the poems come to me, and I accept them. I believe that I am always available to poetry. I know people who say they write during the summertime or something, I don't see how you can do that. When I'm writing, I'm writing. When I'm not, I'm preparing to write, really, because I'm taking in. But I know how to answer a poem, and poems know that I am available, and so they come to me. I really do feel it's that way.

CAVALIERI: And you've never said No Thank You to one?

CLIFTON: Not yet. Even though it's difficult sometimes. In a new collection, I have a poem that was hard for me to write. It's a poem about abuse. And I know that abuse is a subject that is not talked about in our country, and yet it's rampant, and I wanted to write this poem, though it was difficult, but I did.

Grace: You have actually written many poems that are shockers. That hit you right in the chest, and we will hear some of them

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today. Because, after all, that is your canon of work.

CLIFTON: And it's about being human. And being human doesn't mean that it's always wonderful, and you've done all the really swell things. It's sort of about recognizing all of the elements of human-ness.

CAVALIERI: You're a historian as well. So that when you bring that knowledge of history, and your investigations, and your research to that spare, clear . . . short poem, sometimes, it is a power punch. You won an Emmy award from the American Academy of Television Arts and Sciences.

CLIFTON: That was for a television program called "Free to Be You and Me" with Marlo Thomas. I was one of the authors.

CAVALIERI: I was doing children's programming for PBS, and I remember that. You did *Vegetable Soup* also.

CLIFTON: You remember *Vegetable Soup*?

CAVALIERI: I broadcast it on the daytime schedule.

CLIFTON: Oh right. I wrote part of *Vegetable Soup*, and it was a job. I mean thirteen straight weeks you have to do something; that was terrible.

CAVALIERI: Two fellowships from the NEA, the Shelley Memorial Award. Do you remember which poem that was?

CLIFTON: I don't. I think that's for your work. . . .

CAVALIERI: But the most important prize was the YMHA Poetry Center Discovery Award.

CLIFTON: Yes. That's how I was first published.

CAVALIERI: That was Robert Hayden's doing.

CLIFTON: The way it happened was that I had read in an old . . .

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well . . . then it was called *Negro Digest*, later, it became *Black World*, and I read about Robert Hayden, and I loved his work. I was a housewife with six children under seven years old. . . . How did I do that? . . . I have no idea. . . . And I read about him, and I thought, “well, now that’s a black guy,” I think, or, no I said, “that’s a colored guy! I think I’ll send him a poem and see what he thinks.” And so I did.

CAVALIERI: Was he at Michigan?

CLIFTON: Yes, but he sent the poem, a group of poems on to Carolyn Kiser, and I give honor to Carolyn Kiser, who has been a very generous worker in the field. Carolyn took my poems to the Poetry Center, and I won the Discovery Award. I had never heard of the Discovery Award.

CAVALIERI: And that started it all.

CLIFTON: Yes. There was an editor in the audience from Random House, and she wanted to know if I had a manuscript. Beats me how I won, but I have always taken great care of the flow of the poems, the flow of the words, the flow of the music, all of that. And I did not ever take creative writing classes, I learned by reading, and I think it was just part of who I am. I do believe that. Because I never . . . I didn’t understand, or I didn’t know the names of things at that time. I have learned quite a bit now. And they did offer me a contract for *Good Times*, and I was shocked, and I was *embarrassed*, which is really interesting. And that manuscript was one of the first books of poems on the *New York Times* Ten Best Books of the Year in 1969.

CAVALIERI: And since that time, did you communicate with Robert Hayden?

CLIFTON: I did get to know him. I’ve been very fortunate in the people I have known as friends. I remember during the first, uh, I think it was the Carter years, when there was a salute to American poetry, Robert Hayden and his wife and I were all standing in the line together, waiting to go in. And of the seven poets reading, two women were from Maryland, that was Josephine Jacobson and

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myself.

CAVALIERI: Well, since that time, you have been elected a Chancellor of the Academy of American Poets. Not a bad ride.

CLIFTON: Not bad.

CAVALIERI: And now a member of the Academy of Arts and Sciences.

CLIFTON: Why I'm there, I have no clue, except that it's supposed to be made up of intellectuals and there is a group of art people, and I thought it was interesting, because Baryshnikov is also a Fellow. You know I'd go a lot of places to stand in the same room with Baryshnikov.

CAVALIERI: What do you think people like about your work?

CLIFTON: I like to think that people like humor in poetry. I think, sometimes, things are *very* funny. And also, I'm quite fond of sensuality in poetry, and why not. Well I was going to read something, but perhaps not. But perhaps so. Yes, okay.

CAVALIERI: Be brave, Lucille. That is like you. And there's no one listening but eight million people . . . don't we wish.

CLIFTON: Oh well. They all know about this. All right, this is a poem called "the women you are accustomed to."

First of all, my daughters and I sometimes talk about the ladies who wear a black dress a lot and have their hair look sort of sculptured, it looks as if you wouldn't muss it or anything, and there are men that are used to that sort of woman. And then you come along with your wildness, and I always think that's great. This is called "the women you are accustomed to."

wearing that same black dress,
their bronze hair set in perfect place,
their lips and asses tight;
these women gathered in my dream
to talk their usual talk,

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their conversations spiked with the names
of avenues in France.

and when i asked them what the hell,
they shook their marble heads
and walked erect out of my sleep,
back into a town which knows
all there is to know
about the cold outside, while I relaxed
and thought of you,
your burning blood, your dancing tongue.

CLIFTON: They're all always about a little more than the words, as a poem is one of those things that is more than a sum of all its parts.

CAVALIERI: Well . . . you say what you mean.

CLIFTON: I try to.

CAVALIERI: And Eudora Welty said that's good "but beware if you don't mean what you say," and I think that you qualify on both counts. You mean what you say.

CLIFTON: And that's *all* I mean! I, for instance, I have a poem called "the lost baby poem," and when it is taught, it is taught oftentimes in schools, as if it were about miscarriages . . . and it's about abortions. And the only reason it is taught as about miscarriages, I think, is because teachers wish their students, and wish themselves to think I'm a nice person. And obviously if you've had an abortion, you can't be a nice person. I disagree completely with that, you know. And I've had students come up to me and say, you know, "Isn't that about an abortion?" And I say, "yes", and they say, "my teacher says it's about a miscarriage." And I always say, don't you know, they'd prefer to believe that, and it's okay.

CAVALIERI: They're trying to protect you. But, you're a warrior nevertheless.

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CLIFTON: I write a lot about the Bible because I think of the Lucifer connection, and I was raised a good Baptist. People say that I am a religious person, and I've had people argue with me about it, and I think I'm a spiritual person. I don't think I'm particularly religious, though I am interested in belief systems, and always have been. But I have some poems about Lucifer. And people say, "Oh, you're writing about the devil." No, I'm not. I'm writing about Lucifer who was, according to the Bible, the most beautiful star in the heavens, who was close to God, and who had a job to do and did it, it seems to me. My Lucifer and Milton's Lucifer are not quite the same person. But I do believe that if what we say is so, about the All Powerful, then Lucifer must have also had a job to do, and did it. "lucifer speaks in his own voice."

sure as i am
of the seraphim
folding wing
so am i certain of a
graceful bed
and a soft caress
along my long belly
at end time it was
to be
i who was called son
if only of the morning
saw that some must
walk or all will crawl
so slithered into earth
and seized the serpent in
the animals i became
the lord of snake for
adam and for eve
I the only Lucifer
light-bringer
created out of fire
illuminate i could
and so
illuminate i did

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CAVALIERI: From *The Book of Light*.

CLIFTON: Yes. And “eve’s version.” Eve always knew what was going on, you know. But like a lot of women, she didn’t want to let on, you know, she allowed Adam to believe that *he* knew what was going on. “eve’s version.”

(now see, Eve was sort of sassy)

smooth talker
slides into my dreams
and fills them with apple
apple snug as my breast
in the palm of my hand
apple sleek apple sweet
and bright in my mouth

it is your own lush self
you hunger for
he whispers lucifer
honey-tongue.

CAVALIERI: That’s a bluesy song.

CLIFTON: Yes. Well, why not. Now, “the story thus far.” And all of this is based on verses of the Bible.

CAVALIERI: Which you know very well.

CLIFTON: I absolutely do. I mean in order to write about something, you have to find out about it.

so they went out
clay and morning star
following the bright back
of the woman

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as she walked past
the cherubim
turning their fiery swords
past the winged gate

into the unborn world
chaos fell away
before her like a cloud
and everywhere seemed light

seemed glorious
seemed very eden

Eden means the Garden of Earthly Delights; Adam means clay; Lucifer was the morning star, sun of the morning, all of that.

CAVALIERI: Why did Lucifer fall? Why was that his job?

CLIFTON: There are all kinds of ways . . . we're all speculating about this. Milton was speculating, so am I. I think there are some who would say pride. He wanted to be as great as God. Some say that.

CAVALIERI: His favorite angel.

CLIFTON: Yes, but then again, perhaps he was entrusted with the task of testing. And so he did. He may not have wished to do it, but he did.

CAVALIERI: That's your theory?

CLIFTON: That's the theory today.

CAVALIERI: It's a kind one. It does not damn.

CLIFTON: Yes, I hope it does not . . . it makes the deity complex . . . more complex. We think that we are in His image, but I have a feeling that He is in ours. Quite often. There's a manuscript, soon to be a book, called *Mercy*. I have a daughter who passed away two years ago, those who have lost a child know how very

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traumatic that is, and I was going someplace, and I was thinking about poems, about the beauty of the landscape and all of that sort of thing, and I was trying to find a poem of mine that was like that, and I couldn't find anything! I couldn't find anything that said that though every poem I write truly is a love poem. Truly *is* a love poem. In "Mercy" I celebrate how wonderful the world, water, grass, and sky. And you know, it's very hard for a person who looks like me. For instance—I was in Mississippi, and I know my sense of humor is very peculiar, but at the University, they were doing a tribute to a woman, an African American woman, whose children graduated from the university just after the difficult days. And I thought it was very interesting that in her honor they were planting a *tree*. I just found that very funny. But I'm sure no one else did.

CAVALIERI: This is true. Beneath every poem, there is another poem.

CLIFTON: One poem in the new book is about water. I live near the Potomac, I believe it is. I never remember whether it's the Potomac or the Patuxant, but I live, in St. Mary's County on a river, all my friends are very into the whitecaps and all of that. Well, I've always lived near water, but I haven't ever thought about it much. And suddenly one day I was looking, and the whitecaps were coming in, and everybody was very excited. And I started thinking about the whitecaps coming in looked like nappy hair . . . looking like white nappy hair walking, you know, under water, walking toward shore. So, that poem is called "wind on the water."

CLIFTON: Another poem is about my sister—I had a sister who was a prostitute. And she was wonderful, and, look, I wasn't the only sister who had a sister who was a prostitute, I am the one who talks about it.

CAVALIERI: And writes poems about it.

CLIFTON: Yes. So that poem is called "here rests." My sister died, oh, years back, years back. She was quite something.

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CAVALIERI: What an elegy that poem must be. What was the pimp like?

CLIFTON: Oh, he was nice. They once visited when I was going to come to Howard University. I went to Howard in the fifties, and they took me to lunch once. I was sixteen, and I had never been away from home. And they sat me down and had a list of places in D.C. that if they heard I appeared there, they would be pretty angry, and they would get me about it. And so I never went to any of those places, because I was pretty sure they'd know.

CAVALIERI: Watching out for you.

CLIFTON: Yes. Well, we were family, you know.

CAVALIERI: Tell us about Mama. Your Mama stories are well known.

CLIFTON: Of course everybody's mother was a saint, except mine really was. I should say that my mother dropped dead when she was forty-four years old, a month before my oldest daughter was born. But when I went to Howard, I had never been away from home. I won a full scholarship. Oh, they were very proud, though they had no idea where Howard was. And when I went there, we were so poor, I had taken my grandmother's chest, her trunk, and I was embarrassed by it. It was tied with ropes. So I had it put in the basement at Howard, and then I would unpack at night, so people wouldn't see this trunk. And when we got off the train, several of us from the neighborhood, a gentleman, I think he was a sophomore—you were met at the train station by people, by upper class people—and he came to my friend, her name was Betty Dixon (Betty if you're listening, you might remember this), and he said to her, "Oh, you're so cute; you'll really last here. You'll have a good time." And he looked at me and said, "And you must be her mother." And I thought, "I hate this place, and as soon as I eat, I'm going home." But I insisted on lunch first. And then when I got on campus, I saw wealthy African Americans. I had never seen them before. And I called home, and I said, "Mama! They got matching robes and slippers!" and she said, "Baby, it's the good life." And that's what she wanted for me, the good life.

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CAVALIERI: Baby, this is the big time. You hit pay dirt. You're in a dorm with people with matching slippers.

CLIFTON: Yes! Oh, that was exciting.

CAVALIERI: Well, bless you, Mama. Because you're the one that made Lucille say "Free and" . . . let's see what you said, "Empowered and Free." That's what she made you feel like. At five years old.

CLIFTON: Yes, our family, my father and the kids were always Baptists. My mother was what people call a "holy roller," and she would get happy and carry on, and my brother and I were terribly embarrassed most of the time. And I was supposed to do a recitation in church, and I . . . I think I was just tired of reciting. I was the smart one, do you know, how in small churches you all have labels. And in our family I had a label. My sister was "the pretty one," my younger sister, I was "the smart one," my brother was "the boy." And my older sister was, "the one who was a prostitute" she was, a prostitute actually. She had gone off by then. And I went to the front of the church when my name was called, and I really just suddenly didn't feel like it, do you know? I was tired. I didn't *want* to remember anything. And I stood there quietly, and people were muttering. The ladies of the church were saying, "Make her do it, why isn't she saying anything? Come on Lu, come on honey." And my mother *marched* from the back of the church, this was not her church as she was sanctified, you know, this was a Baptist church. My mother marched up the aisle to me and took my hand, and turned around and said, "She don't have to do anything she don't want to do." And I remember thinking, "Wow! Is that true? That's wonderful!"

CAVALIERI: Permission at last.

CLIFTON: She don't have to do anything she don't want to do.

CAVALIERI: And you really went through something. For a moment you said you changed inside. You felt suddenly free and empowered.

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CLIFTON: Suddenly. Maybe this was true. Maybe I didn't have to do what I didn't want to do. And so I think, I have two, really, favorite sayings: one of them is from Bessie Smith, "I was not built for size, I was built for comfort." and the other was from Geraldine, Flip Wilson as Geraldine, who said once, "Even when I do things I don't want to do, I only do 'em because I want to." And that just has kept me going.

CAVALIERI: Well, she blessed your boat early on, didn't she? And your new book will be called *Mercy*. And please stay with that title.

CLIFTON: Oh, absolutely.

CAVALIERI: That is all-encompassing. The power that one word can have.

CLIFTON: Well, in the new book is a poem called "cancer," and I have had cancer several times.

Now there is also one poem I mentioned that is a difficult poem. This is a poem that was very hard for me. But I don't say No to poems, and I do believe that this is one of the two things poetry can do. One is to say to the audience, "you are not alone," and that seems to me very important. In traveling the country, and I've read in every state and some other countries, I have found Americans to be so very lonely. We are so lonely, as people. And to have someone say, "you are not alone" is important. And also I think poetry can speak for those who have not yet found their voice to speak. And I know that there are a lot of people in this country who have been abused, by those who purported to love them perhaps. Anyway, this was a hard poem for me.

CAVALIERI: The title poem of your book, *Mercy*. Mercy on all of us that do anything to anyone. I think women poets have done so much, talking about their beginnings, Maya Angelou too. And everyone who has the courage to push back the border one more inch, so we can say one more thing, so one more child can know eventually she's not alone.

CLIFTON: That seems important. I think we have a tendency to

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believe that bad things happen to people who are in a pathologic situation, something like that. But I've read poems about abuse—I remember some years back—to a group of faculty wives at Princeton. And they were furious, they did not like me particularly because I seemed to not hate my father. And, you know, it's a very complicated thing, very complicated. But hate doesn't solve anything. And this does not mean that I think that everything's okay. I do not. I do not.

CAVALIERI: Or you would not have written that poem. Because that is the act of salvation.

CLIFTON: Because a bad thing happened. And a bad thing happens a lot, and we must go on realizing that the world is full of bad things, quite often.

CAVALIERI: Redemption. Is what the poem believes in so I think that manuscript may be very important. Because that seems to be the theme.

CLIFTON: Oh there's also a poem for my friend. . . . W. S. Merwin is a friend, and he's just a dear guy. He was at St. Mary's College, and a student asked him what he did all day, which I think is a very interesting question. And he started saying, "well, I do so and so and so and so, then I walk the blind dog." And I said whoa! I know a poem when I hear one!" And so I did ask about his dog—and William, first of all, William loves his dogs. And he has a black Lab called Muku. Muku means the dark of the moon, you know, just before there is new moon. And she's blind, and he walks her. And thinking of that, well I wrote a poem "walking the blind dog."

CAVALIERI: Does he like that poem?

CLIFTON: Do you know I have not sent it to him? I know it's awful. I'm so sorry, William. I have to send it to him.

CAVALIERI: I am looking at your manuscript, and I see the next poem looks like a different shape for you. A prose poem, I think.

CLIFTON: This is a prose poem, and I *never* do that, but this poem

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wanted to be that, and so there it is. This was a poem about a place because I'm very interested in history, and the whole history of a thing, and St. Mary's County is a very historical part of the state of Maryland, certainly. It is the mother county of Maryland.

CAVALIERI: What year?

CLIFTON: Sixteen something. It was founded for religious toleration. The Carroll family, the Lords Calvert. And there's a plantation there called Mulberry Fields, and what really was interesting to me was that Mulberry Fields had a slave graveyard. And it's always interesting to me to go and try to find the graveyards of the slaves. They often are lost because markers, if there were markers, are done in wood, and of course they rot. Someone asked me once—I said I was going to try to find some slave graves, and they said, "oh, do they have them?" And it occurred to me that everybody dies; they didn't just throw you out in the yard, you know. Anyway, the slaves are something we don't talk about, but it's negating a history of *my* family, anyway. The thing about Mulberry Fields that's interesting is they had rocks and stones as markers, there at Mulberry Fields. But at a certain point, they were taken up and used to build a wall around the big house. And some of them were used in recreating the state house. And that turned into a poem.

CAVALIERI: I wish that the stones were just a metaphor. But they are not.

CLIFTON: I'm afraid not.

CAVALIERI: Here's why it's a prose poem . . . it seems to me . . . because as you get more involved in history, you have more *facts* you want to explain. You just want to say more things. But with the 'intended narrative,' we come to the poem with what we want to say, and it kills the poem. So I see how you get around that is by putting yourself in the landscape, and taking the flack of the poem by saying, "I say, I say, I say." That takes away all the expositional problems.

CLIFTON: And then the "they say," because it was interesting to

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me that the man who was a preservationist on that land was interested in preserving places, not people, and not the stories. They want the stories of the *place*, but the stories of the *people* are what interest me always. And he said that on the rocks and stones there were marks, and triangles, and things, and they must have been trying to invent a language. And I'm thinking, my lord, these are rituals, these are African kinds of ritual markings, and they mean all kinds of things, because you can see them, some of them still, on the wall.

CAVALIERI: Well, maybe that's why you went to St. Mary's.

CLIFTON: I've often wondered.

CAVALIERI: I mean, you were at Columbia. You were in three colleges, at Duke, but you took the chair at St. Mary's, and you are unearthing the stones there.

CLIFTON: Well, I want to tell the stories.

CAVALIERI: And I remember sitting in the St. Mary's State House with you when you were saying, "people were lynched here. Somebody was lynched in this house. I'm not feeling so good." And you felt them rising up out of the ground.

CLIFTON: Oh absolutely, absolutely. My neighbors say that now they can never look out and see the whitecaps without saying, "oh, the elders are coming."

CAVALIERI: The ancestors.

CLIFTON: Well, one of the new poems is sort of fun. This is funny, I think. You know, I have, I think you might have seen them, Grace, I have a lot of videos. I mean, I'm into videos. And they are eclectic, as am I, I'd like to think. That is to say, I've got all the Shakespeare things, and the poetry things. Then I've got a great collection of Godzilla, who's one of my heroes and all those people as well. And I used to really like The Phantom. Do you remember The Phantom? You see this is something that people don't talk about. As a young, at that time called "colored girl," I

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felt very safe around the monsters, because they only went for white girls. And it's not something people talk about. So I wrote "the phantom." That's what the poem is about.

CAVALIERI: It sounds terrific for *Mercy*. How did that word come to you? The simplest words, like Richard Wilbur said, work best. Sometimes love is the best word you can say. And sometimes I-love-you is the most important thing you could say. So, how did *Mercy* visit you?

CLIFTON: Well, first of all, it's based on the—I never know whether it's epigram or epigraph, and I don't care so much. But it was based on something—this book is based on my daughter who died, and there was something—a line I had in different poem in a different book, called "the only mercy is memory." And this book is something about memory. And so *Mercy* seemed right, and once I could say it to myself, it did seem to be the name of the book.

CAVALIERI: That is your line?

CAVALIERI AND CLIFTON: The only mercy is memory.

CLIFTON: The only hell is regret.

CAVALIERI: We have to say a word about your children's books, before we get to a final poem, because there are about sixteen of them. You think eighteen.

CLIFTON: Something like that.

CAVALIERI: And do you have fun doing that?

CLIFTON: I do. I have been asked which I prefer. I would say that I don't think "preference" is the right idea, but writing for children is important. And when I first started, my first children's book came out the same month, in the same year that my first poetry did. They were both November 1969. "*Some of the Days of Everett Anderson.*"

CAVALIERI: And Everett Anderson has had quite a literary life.

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CLIFTON: There are seven books, and I'm sure one day I'm going to write, you know, words at the funeral.

CAVALIERI: I like what your grandchild said when you called him in California.

CLIFTON: The teacher had been showing him Everett Anderson books,

CAVALIERI: By Lucille Clifton.

CLIFTON: Yes! And she'd say things like, "Look at this. Look what I have. Does this mean something to you?" "No." "Don't you think this is wonderful that I have this?" "No, it's nice." So this one day I called, and his name was, is Dakota, and I said, "Hello, who's this?" and he said, "This is Dakota Brown, who's this?" And I said, "This is Lucille Clifton." And he said, "oh", and I said, "Koti, it's Grandma!" And he said, "Grandma! Are you Lucille Clifton?" And I said, "Well, yes!" I said, "Where is your mother, I want to speak to her!"

CAVALIERI: There's so much in that, because, there's the very serious fact that our image runs ahead of us, and it really is quite different from the *being*, isn't it? And he picked up on that. Hey, here's the image, and here's my grandmother. And how do these things match?

CLIFTON: Indeed, because the older child . . . at one point, his teacher called home and said she wanted to talk to my daughter because he was making things up, because he was talking about Lucille Clifton, saying he was related to her. And so she went to the school, and the woman said, well, you know, this is his fantasy life and all that, and he has this fantasy thing, and what can we do? And my daughter looked at her and said, "Well, I don't know. Lucille Clifton *is* my mother." And she was shocked.

CAVALIERI: Wouldn't you love to have been there to see that?

CLIFTON: I would have laughed.

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CAVALIERI: We're going to have a closing poem.

CLIFTON: This is, to me, a poem that was done as an assignment. I gave the assignment to my workshop class, and I try to write with them sometimes. And someone had said, "do you think you can write a poem about anything," and I said sure. And this is a poem that my editor at BOA likes a lot. And I hadn't thought of it that way, but it's called "three potatoes," and that's because I said sure, you can write about potatoes, you can write something wonderful. And it's for Jeannie, who asked the question.

begin with the majesty
of three kings
rising over the wilderness,

add three wise men,
astrologers
interpreting the sky,

follow their watch
to three worlds meeting
and the line between them thin

as gold; three monarchs
kneeling, their eyes downcast,
three donkeys nuzzling the sleeping babe

and three potatoes, their naked eyes
glistening in a field.

CAVALIERI: The inimitable voice of Lucille Clifton. This is "The Poet and the Poem" from the Library of Congress. This series is brought to you by the Witter Bynner Foundation in Poetry and the Humanities Council of Washington, D.C.

"blessing the boats," "donor," "the women you are accustomed to," "why some people be mad at me sometimes," "lucifer speaks in his own voice," "eve's version," "the story thus far," copyright 2000 by Lucille Clifton. Reprinted from *Blessing the Boats: New and Selected Poems 1988-2000* by Lucille Clifton. With the permission of BOA Editions, Ltd. "three potatoes" copyright 2000, Lucille Clifton. With the permission of the author.