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11-12-1987

### Lucille Clifton: 11-12-1987

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#### Repository Citation

Clifton, Lucille; Rubin, Stanley Sanvel; and Piccione, Anthony, "Lucille Clifton: 11-12-1987" (1987). *Writers Forum Videos*. Video 45.  
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**Clifton:** There is a girl inside.  
She is randy as a wolf.  
She will not walk away and leave these bones to an old woman.  
She is a green tree in a forest of kindling.  
She is a green girl in a used poet.  
She has waited patient as a nun for the second coming when she can break through gray hairs into blossom.  
And her lovers will harvest honey and thyme, and the woods will be wild with the damn wonder of it.

[ Music ]

**Host:** Now in its exclusive and continuing series of discussions with leading literary contemporaries, this is Brockport Writer's Forum.

[ Music ]

**Host:** Welcome to The Writer's Forum. Our very special guest today, Lucille Clifton, is one of America's leading poets. Author of six collections of poetry as well as more than a dozen books of fiction and poetry for children. Her many awards include the Juniper Prize, a nomination for the Pulitzer Prize, and her work as a writer on the celebrated television special, *Free to be You and Me*, was honored with an Emmy from the Academy of Television Arts and Sciences. Miss Clifton is in Brockport on the occasion of the publication of her two most recent books of poetry, *Next*; and *Good Woman: Poems and Memoir, 1969-1980*. Both published by BOA Editions. Lucille Clifton is Professor of Literature at the University of California at Santa Cruz.

Lucille, it's a great pleasure to have you here.

**Clifton:** Thank you.

**Host:** Speaking with us today is Anthony Piccione, Poet and Professor of English at the College of Brockport.

Tony, welcome [inaudible].

I'd like to start by asking you about the poem you read which seems to be a very celebratory poem. It's about yourself, isn't it?

**Clifton:** Oh, yes. Indeed. And I, I hope it's celebratory. I, I like to think about celebrating as something I hope I can try to do. This poem I, I remember very clearly it came to be written because I, I have, I have six people who used to be children. And I was taking my older son when he was still a child to buy some shoes. And you know they have these mirrors at the bottom in the shoe store so you can see your feet. And we walked in and sat down. And while we were waiting for the salesperson to come to us, I looked down in the mirror. And there was an older woman sitting with my son. And I mean, I had no idea who she was. And I thought, "Well, I've got to do something about this because inside myself, you know, I'm -this she has probably just taken my son for the day. But I'm still here." And went home and wrote a poem.

**Host:** There's a way with that, with that poem that manages to say perhaps you're [inaudible] poetic. And I wonder if you could say a few words about the absolute sheer primal use of language in that. And at the same time, in those last two lines, remind us of about everything we ever knew.

**Clifton:** Well, I, I think in language, which is very important to me. First of all, the way I use language is purposeful. People sometimes have asked me, I think people sometimes think that when I learn more about language, I'll use harder words is the way they would put it. And, in this poem and in a lot of poems, every word stands for so much to me. I, I really select words hopefully because they are the absolute, only word

that will do. And I, I'm convinced of a number of things. One is the, the music in the American language. The music in the spoken American language. And, and the usefulness of the spoken American language. I believe all language is available for poetry. I believe all experience is available for poetry. And I like to, I think that there is a kind of magic in, in plain things. In ordinariness. I have a book called An Ordinary Woman. People are always saying, "Well, you're an extraordinary woman. You're not ordinary." But that, that's the magic of it. That the, the plainest things, it seems to me, are filled with wonder. And hopefully I like to use language, not, I don't like to say simply because that often has a negative connotation. But I try to use language clearly. I wish to be clear and to be direct. But that doesn't mean everything is on the surface. I mean, there's always something, there's always a word and the shadow of the word and the resonance of the word. And the word thyme in this poem, for instance. That will harvest honey and t-h-y-m-e. Thyme. Or t-i-m-e, time. Or lots of things like that.

**Host:** You've just spoken your feeling for the beauty of the American language. And of course you, you write a lot in dialect and in different dialects. Including some of your best-known children's books, really. Would you say something about that?

**Clifton:** Well, it, when I say that all language is available for poetry, I mean ALL language. Spoken language as well as written language. I think it's a mistake to think that the only valid languages are standard written, formal English. Spoken casual language, we all have casual languages. None of them are happenstance. I think people have what they call "Black dialect" if you want to call it that has rules and things. It's not just typewriter tricks. There was a time when people wrote in, in that language. And leaving off the G's was supposed to be it, you know. And of course the language has rules. And because they're not written down doesn't mean they are not valid rules. We, we in the west I think sometimes, whatever that means, have a tendency to think if it's written down, it's valid, you know? I always found that to be true. When my kids were in school, I could do anything I wanted to at their school because I wrote books. And I always used to say it's good, it's lucky that I think I'm fair-minded because I could have been Jack the Ripper. But if I wrote books, things were printed. That gave them a validity, gave me a validity. And fortunately, I am not Jack the Ripper. Because you could have [inaudible].

**Host:** I heard you read yesterday to a group of teachers from a book called We All Come Across -

**Clifton:** All Us -

**Host:** All Us Come Cross the Water. Sorry.

**Clifton:** Absolutely.

**Host:** We you know it's a terrifically and really informative book. And I saw the teachers respond to it beautifully. But what kind of reaction have you had in classrooms and from you know teachers -- ?

**Clifton:** Well, you have very mixed. That book, All Us Come Cross the Water, and also another book I have called, My Brother Fine with Me. Because everyone first of all, there's a tendency of some people perhaps to think that I write All Us Come Cross the Water because I don't know about All of Us Come Across the Water. Interestingly enough, some of the most criticism comes from black teachers. Who have felt that I might perhaps be perpetuating some kind of stereotypical idea of, of language among the larger community about black language. But if, if I'm doing

anything, I, I often am trying to redefine. And because people believe a certain doesn't mean to me - if, if people are believing something that is not sensible. And I'm, I'm into sensible. That doesn't mean I have to go for it, you know? Just because people believe that that might be a bad English and I, I taught at a school for some years called Coppin State College in Maryland. Black college where people had bought the idea often that white people spoke good English and black people spoke bad English. And all written - everyone has their, a casual language. A casual spoken language. And we all speak several languages depending on who we're talking to. And all of these languages are valid. Everyone just needs all the languages that they need. So if you, if you're going to stand on the corner, you just need to talk corner which is okay. But if you're going to go from there, if you're going to do something else, you need more than that. That doesn't mean you replace your own language. You augment it. And I like to use, if children are talking casually to each other, I like to use the language in which they speak. Because that's what's artistically valid and honest. And I'm valid and honest [laughter].

**Host:** I'd like to ask you further on this that there's a poem in Good Woman called "Holy Night" which I think holds a great deal of what, what we've been trying to say. That the person of Mary doesn't know enough about PhDs and linguistics and has chosen creatively or organically the absolute right language to hold the miracles of the universe. That makes me, me weep. That opening line there. Could you read that, that one poem, and we'll go on to talk about it a bit? I think it's on page 200.

**Clifton:** Thank you. Those [inaudible] are, yes. This is called Holy Night, and it's in a, a group of poems. And I can, I can say after what I was trying to do. This is Mary, the mother of Christ, talking.

Joseph, I afraid of stars, their brilliant seeing.

so many eyes, such light.

Joseph, I cannot still these limbs, I hands keep moving toward I breasts,  
so many stars.

so bright.

Joseph, is wind burning from east?

Joseph, I shine, oh Joseph, oh illuminated night.

In these poems, I was trying to do something. Trying to use a kind of language which is an artificial West Indian dialect. I thought about, about Mary and about this little sect on this, in this little town. And about how it wasn't, you know, Christianity. But it was just a little group of people in a little town with a lady who wasn't sure what was going on. And I thought about Rastafarianism. Which is a little group of people in a little sect on a little island. And, and here is another language that seems to me available. And I wanted very much to, to, to show something about the parallels between that experience. About this person who, who may in fact have the last poems in, in that I think. I was saying that she's not sure she'd have done that again, you know? She's not convinced that, that it was the, that it, that it was what she would have chosen. And the last poem, may I read the last poem?

**Host:** Please.

**Clifton:** Called Island Mary. And this is Mary after she'd old. Now in the first poem, I, I got interested in Mary as she was older. I think because I'm a mother, and because I think the first poem in the sequence I start thinking about suppose one of my daughters came to me and said, "A star

just came into the East, and I am now," you know. I mean, I think I probably would have not wished this life for my child. So this is Mary after she's older.

"Island Mary."

After the all been done and I, one old creature carried on another creature's back,

I wonder could I have fought these thing?

Surrounded by no son of mine save old men calling Mother like in the tale the astrologer tell.

I wonder could I have walk away when voices singing in my sleep?

I one old woman.

Always I seem to worrying now for another young girl asleep in the plain evening.

What song around her ear?

What star still choosing?

I'm not sure anybody chooses for their child that, that they be ostracized. That they have to leave town. That their son be murdered in front of them. And I wonder what Mary thought about - I'm always wondering the, the thing nobody else is wondering, I think.

**Host:** Well, yeah. And what I would like to pursue in this is that the language is the inevitable only language that could have held that.

**Clifton:** I hope so.

**Host:** And perhaps it's because it's a language that never thinks of itself as language. And we spent long periods in my creative writing classes trying to talk about what it is that you do without making a crime out of talking about it. And one of the things that helped us was your little intro to some poems in Bill Heyen's Generation of 2000 where genuinely you don't know what to make of [inaudible].

**Clifton:** Oh, I have inept in, in everyday life.

**Host:** And poets can't fill out the income tax things when it says things like "Enter age here." That has so much meaning. So the point I'd like you to address is apparently, and really apparently you came to, to the way of things first. And then looked for the language that would do it.

**Clifton:** Well I, I think in, in things like that my problem often is that I know what the word means when I use. But I don't think, it doesn't follow to me that that's what it means exactly when someone else uses it, you know? I mean, words, it seems to me, have, have a feeling and I mean. I think I write out of intellect some. Just some. Out of intuition, some. Probably more. And then a smidgeon of something else that I don't have a word for. And I have come to trust all three of those things. Maybe because I never took creative writing classes, though I teach creative writing classes. And they are so important, you wouldn't believe. Mostly because I teach them. But what I'm not sure that I think I would have come to my own voice much later if I had taken them. Because classes have a tendency to emphasize the intellectual at the expense of the feeling of words. So just because, when we go to the supermarket, this is what you're referring to. I follow my kids. They take my hand because the door says, the doors say In and Out. Now, if they have no arrows on the ground, and I do look down for arrows. Well, out, my thinking is I'm out, so that must be the door for me. But, but that's not it. And I forget all the time. Same thing with elevators. When I go to an elevator, where do I want, what do I want it to do? Do I want it to come to where I am? Do I

want to press where I want to go? You know what I mean? Seems to me that these things are not clear as they ought to be. But you know what? I always know what, I know what I mean and feel, et cetera with a word. And I, I've often said this is with children's books, and with children's book especially. That if I can hear the language, and if I can look and see the landscape people live in. And I'm not a landscape person. I don't write about things like that. I can know something about their lives. I can feel something about their lives. Because the way people speak does have something to do - the way they use the words and the resonances and the, the feelings the words mean for them. Academics generally, and people who are educated generally it seems to me use words in an intellectual kind of way. All they think about is the definition of the words. And, and probably the dictionary definition. That's what they mostly think about. But there's so much else to a word. There's, there's the sound of it. And that seems that's where you hear the music. And there's the, the feeling of it. And there's, there's among people there's the agreement about it. And I, I really do for some reason, I have no idea why, for some reason all those things enter into things for me.

**Host:** Have you ever found yourself being of accused of writing in a simple language?

**Clifton:** Oh, absolutely.

**Host:** And knowing truly that that's taken your entire life to reach?

**Clifton:** Absolutely, people all the time. People ask me, "When are you going to start writing something hard?" all the time. And, and I work on this stuff, you know? I don't just sit down and dash it out. And that would be, that would be easy to do. But -

**Host:** Well also what your, what your work says to us in those hard classes, the creative writing classes is that it says though you learned everything in the world first and perhaps through your fingers. And, and what you would name then that way, you name them. So in other words, the world was real. And you had to find the language that would also be real.

**Clifton:** That would fit it.

**Host:** That's -

**Clifton:** And I think that's a strength of mine. The fact that I, that I - I have a poem that I learned the world all downside up, something like that. And that has made me wise. I think so because I, I learned to go less by the names of things than by the things. And then, then names could be put to it. But I think sometimes my mother names the things like I didn't know it was called a hammer. It was always a "dompadomp." Because my mother called it, "This is a dompadomp, you see." And that made sense. And then later I thought, "Hammer? Oh." And then you know when you're younger, you're kind of embarrassed because I thought, "Oh, Lord. They've got a name for this thing that's actually a dompadomp."

**Host:** And naming becomes incredibly important.

**Clifton:** It's a very important thing. I, I, in children's books, I love to give names to characters. Naming is, to name something, you give it a kind of what? Life. Something. So you have to be so careful. And you know, see my mind goes this way. You never know that if you've given it a name, you have to know that it may not be its actual name. But it may accept that you call it that. I mean, you know what I'm trying to say? I always think about it with cows. Okay, I know. I call them cow. What do they call me? What do they call themselves, you know? Probably the, probably us, which is what people often call themselves.

**Host:** A little boy in All Us Come Cross the Water. His name is, is terribly important. Which means?

**Clifton:** Well, well it means unity. A broad definition. And that was written - it's a children's book which was written because of people talking about difficulty in pronouncing names. And I believe that people are people. And everything else - I have a poem about trees. And it says that all things that live are kin. And I really believe that. And that ones have the right to name themselves of their own naming. We have that right. And the wrong name does damage, I think.

**Host:** So in a way, getting down inside the real world and naming it in real terms. How would you ever begin to say that in a creative writing class except to say go away and come back in five years and we'll talk?

**Clifton:** Maybe that's what you say. I, I, I think in my creative writing classes because I never learned all that other stuff. All I, I knew that when I went into these classes, all I had to give them was an idea was the feeling that one can be committed to something. And that commitment means that your whole self has to enter into it. And they, they tend to sometimes think that maybe they'll give it a try. Not always, but sometimes.

**Host:** When your first book was published, I believe you had six, six children?

**Clifton:** Six little ones.

They were 7, 5, 4, 3, 2, and 1.

**Host:** Four in diapers, you've said?

**Clifton:** Absolutely.

**Host:** Would you say something about how you came, how you managed to do this?

**Clifton:** That's why I write children's books. I, I, I don't know. I, I didn't do a lot else. But I've never been, I've never been a party person or a joining person or anything like that. I, I've loved poems all my life. I've loved reading. I was the kind of kid that read the cereal box, you know. And read, I knew all the ingredients and things because I'd read those things. And reading was encouraged in, in my house. My parents were not educated people. My mother never finished elementary school. My father could only write his name, but they were both great readers. Which I'm sure refutes some stereotype or other. And they encouraged reading in me, and they encouraged me in a lot of things. My father used to always say, "You can do what want to because you're from [inaudible] women." And he also used to tell me, "Every place you are, baby, you're supposed to be there or you wouldn't be there." Which I thought was very sensible. I believe that. And I used to write things down, but it never occurred to me that I could be a writer. But I still wrote all the time. I wrote stories and, and poems. And I loved the way the words fit. I mean, words are so tricky. And I loved the puzzle, I love puzzles anyway. I loved the puzzles of them and the game of them. And it mattered to me how well I did it because things, things where my name is, is there matter to me. So I always say good enough is good enough in my life, but good enough isn't good enough in my work. Writing is not casual. Art is not casual. And, and I really try very hard to help the poem or whatever it is be what it seems to want to be. And I have learned that I'm not the boss. I have learned not, I mean, you have to have ego to write. I think you have to have some think it makes any difference at all. But you leave your ego at the door when you're writing. I, I learned over some time not to show off in my work. Because, because it interferes with the work. You know, I, I

would show off if it didn't, probably. But to me, when you're, when you're doing a poem especially, the poem is everything. And you have to be ruthless even in your own ego. And you have, you have to put all that other stuff aside. And, and allow yourself to - it sounds goofy. But allow yourself to receive and put down the poem. And help it to work through to what it wants to be. Sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn't.

**Host:** I've heard you say, "I don't just like poetry, I love it."

**Clifton:** I do, I love it.

**Host:** What has poetry meant to you in your life?

**Clifton:** It has, it is the kind of thing where whatever mood I'm in, and I'm pretty moody. My students think I'm always happy, cheerful. But I'm, my kids think I'm the moodiest human being on earth. But whatever's happening in my life, if I can feel writing, if I start writing, it's all okay. I think it's, it's the most wonderful feeling to be writing, process. I think that the process is just so exciting. And writing, I've said this a lot of times. Writing a poem seems to me is much more exciting than having written a poem. I feel much more excited writing a poem. After you've written one, it's kind of - ugh. It has turned lots of corners for me. There are words that are thrilling. It is a thrill to me for - you know, Stafford's [inaudible], that I talk about. I like William Stafford a great deal. And the poem, "Dandelion Music"; God is not big, he is right. I mean, really, you know? Things said well is wonderful to me, wonderful.

**Host:** So there's, once again there's a total need to blurt the truth. And as soon as you say something like that these days, you get into discourses of, "What do you mean the? What do you mean truth? What do you mean T, what do you mean R?" but to blurt the truth that you knew before language. Before you put language to it.

**Clifton:** And then all you're doing is, because poetry is sort of is translation at best anyway. You know? Language is like translation. What you're doing is trying to put down some symbols that stand for this thing I feel here. And, and in the face of movements and all kinds of things. It seems to me, because I really do think art is the purpose of an artist is to tell the truth. And that hasn't anything to do with facts. Facts sometimes are even true. That's good. But it seems to me that truth is the important think. I think the, the symbol that I really like about poets is one of my favorite places is the Sonora Desert in Arizona. That's a great desert. That's really great landscape. And the saguaro cactus, in the Sonora Desert, the saguaro are the cactus that stand, and they have this arm up and all that. And they are witnesses. And the saguaro live till about 60 years. And then when they have scars, that's when they grow arms. So they grow arms on their scars. And their scars, the arms like twist all around and make, take interesting shapes. And then, I mean, that seems to me what you do as a poet. Be true to, to your truth and just witness and maintain in the face of all kinds of movements and things. It seems to me that's, that's a good thing to do as a human, to maintain in the face of, of lots of things. To be a decent human being is very hard. You have to start doing it again every morning. But it seems to me worth it.

**Host:** I'm awfully glad you, you talk this way because what I have in mind here too is that you tell, you, you offer us several ways of, of what's true and what's coming true. And some of it is joyful and some of it is scary. I, I wonder if you could talk a little bit about, what, what we



know about women? And what we know about the joy of women? Being one possible salvation, being so joyful that you couldn't possibly do anything wrong again in your life. That would be one way. And the other way also is that there's a sort of a nightmare on the edge of things. A [inaudible] nightmare for us. And then if we're going to save ourselves, we have to do it each alone. And at the same time.

**Clifton:** I think that, I think that - I, I said this yesterday at the meeting also. I think that civilizations are lost in groups and saved one on one. And in the [inaudible] poem I say something that I know I'm your sister because I, I think that in each of us is the possibility of great evil. But if you recognize that, we also have in us the possibility of great good. And it seems to me that, that, that what you do all your life is, is try to, try to overcome the evil part. You know, the part that that's evil, that's the hard thing to do. But it seems to me it's a thing worth doing. And, and living, living takes courage. I, I admire courage tremendously. I, I've been courageous once or twice, not as much as I'd like to be. But maybe sometimes more than I thought I'd be, you know? It seems to me that that's, that there is a great scariness in the world. But that's what courage is, to go out on your fear, to walk out on your fear. And that's just what poetry is, taking the risk of going out on your fear. Women I think, because women bear children, for instance. Which is, which is a painful business. They, they at least are aware of the fact that you can stand pain. I had a friend, a man friend who said to me once he had pierced his ears.

And he said to me, "Do you know why I did this?"

I said, "No, I don't."

He said, "Because I want to experience pain."

And I thought, "This guy has pierced his EAR! I mean, what's the big deal? People do that themselves, you know?" I, I think that being a woman, I, I very much am happy that I am a black woman. I am, I take great joy in that. I think that I believe in karma, and the karma's too immense being anything else, frankly. I, I'm very glad I don't have to deal with that. And there's a kind of understanding I think that women have. And it isn't better or worse, it's just different from, from other understandings sometimes. And I take great joy in, in having that gift.

**Host:** You know, I'm thank -

**Clifton:** It's a scary world.

**Host:** Excuse me. I'm thinking about your great reluctance to joy. And that, that's a spirit matter. And part of what you're saying wouldn't satisfy organized or militant groups such as say feminists. You're willing to, you're willing to be playful with righteous men and not so with unrighteousness. So I - we've come past something, haven't we?

**Clifton:** Really well said. I, I do. I like to be righteous, but I like to be playful. The thing I always find with, with lots of groups is that they don't have a sense of humor. And I, maybe I'm, maybe I'm' nuts, I don't know. But I've always found a lot of funny things. But I, I always am interested and amazed at the different groups of people who, who like me okay. You know? I'm always amazed and happy because I want to be liked of course. But I'm, I'm actually a pretty private kind of person. And I can only take, I take things seriously. But I also think some things are pretty funny. And - [ Inaudible ]

**Host:** And really it doesn't make them [inaudible]. Your humor teaches.

**Clifton:** I hope not. Well, Richard Pryor's proved that. Humorous stuff is pretty funny. I mean pretty serious stuff can be funny.

**Host:** I wonder if you'd read? There's a little series of really woman poems in Next, poems about being a woman, poems about daughters. Wonder if you'd read something from that set?

**Clifton:** Well, I have, I have four daughters and two sons. And this, this well, four daughters, I'll read that. Each of them is - I always tried to raise my kids not - sometimes, if you have kids and they're close together in age. And my children are only seven years apart in age. You start raising them as a group. And I always for some reason felt that I wanted, they were six, six only children. So for instance, my kids never went to school on their birthday. Absolutely never. So because that would be their chance to be at home with just me as an only person. And only the oldest one ever got that chance. So all the rest did. And the kids in school, the teachers would always say, "Oh, so-and-so's absent today. It must be their birthday." And they accepted that. I mean, what could they do? I was, you know, I never thought - I was terrible about things like attendance [laughter]. Which doesn't mean anything excepting that as long as they were doing well in school. And maybe they'd get up one day and be tired. And I understand that, so they wouldn't go. It's kind of interesting. Teachers always thought I was very odd. But anyway, here are two poems. This is called Four Daughters. And it, it's sort of about each of my girls.

I am the sieve she strains from little by little everyday.

I am the rind she is discarding.

I am the riddle she is trying to answer.

Something is moving in the water.

She is the hook.

I am the line.

And this one, Grown Daughter, is amusing to me because my mother used to say I never did anything the way she taught me. And my daughters never do - I always taught the right way to - what I think is right. Mother's speaking, "The right way to do things." And they come up with their own ideas and opinions and ways. It's amazing.

Grown Daughter.

Someone is helping me with the onions.

Who peels in the opposite direction without tears and promises different soup.

I sit with her, watching her.

Learning to love her, but who is she?

Who is she?

Who?

It's about they grow up and they become their own person. And it's natural and -

**Host:** They name themselves.

**Clifton:** They do, and they have that right.

**Host:** I wonder, we've talked a bit about the fact that you've written some beautiful poetry and many beautiful children's books as well. How is it to write these two things?

**Clifton:** Well, it's great because, because you can write, you can write, you know. Sometimes it's a very different process.

**Host:** Would you talk about that?

**Clifton:** Well, well, children's books are much more, much more intellect involved. I mean, you plan to write a children's book. You, I get an idea of something I want to say. Or, or some kind of child I want to, to talk about or something like that. And then you think about the best process, the best way to do it. And you sit down and try to do it. Poems are much more spontaneous and much more balanced, balanced with in other ways than intellectual. But sometimes if, if a poem isn't going well, I - and I'm writing a children's book, I can leave the poem alone and, and free part of my mind to work on it. While I work on a children's book which is a much more conscious and ordered thing. And that's helpful for me. People who know I write poetry tend to not know I write children's books. Well, sometimes they know I write children's books, but people who know I write children's books, and I've written a number of them, don't know that I write poetry. And they're always surprised that people do two things. And that they're two, to me they're not one, one's not a lesser career. It's just that poetry does, poetry does involve my whole heart. And children's books, while I find it important and all that, are not quite as involving for me.

**Host:** You clearly have a sense of audience in your children's fiction. I wonder if when you're trying to reach truth in your poetry, you have any sense of, of whom you're trying to touch?

**Clifton:** I write for whose, I write for who receives it. I have no idea. I don't want to make boundaries for what I write. Hopefully I, I write out of my own life which is what we all do. And my life has been that of a black woman in America. But, but I hope that I tell the truth about that. And truth I think you know touches everybody. I write pretty much for whoever is there to receive it. And I am often surprised at who that is.

**Host:** Poetry does that. I've heard you say, again, reach beyond gender and color and [inaudible].

**Clifton:** A poem is a thing that you can help make that is larger than you. You know? A poetry, poem is, is, is larger than the sum of all its parts. And that's an interesting thing about it, an interesting thing about it. And you never know who. If you write about the things that, that touch humans out of your human heart, I, I feel that it will in fact touch another human heart. And I would, I would probably, I think, and I don't think I've ever said this before, I think I would probably rather touch a human heart than a human mind. I would like to touch them both. But I think I would rather, I think I would stay longer if I touched a heart. I want to touch them both though.

**Host:** I'd like to have you speak a little bit too about I've been doing a great deal of reading. And, and in American Indian stuff. And I think no one has said this yet, but I think some people are going to start witnessing a little Renaissance and returning to self through, especially through some Lakota seers. And that would mean turning some weird people back into human beings. And you invoke Crazy Horse.

**Clifton:** Well Crazy Horse is a great hero of mine. When I was first writing Crazy Horse poems, I started thinking, first of all I thought, "Lucille." You know, sometimes you do think about what are your, your peers going to think? And I was saying, "Black people are going to say, 'what is this with the Native American? You have enough to write about.'" Women are going to say, "What is this with this man? You have enough to write about." But, but I jokingly, and this is sort of true, say that I

started thinking a lot about Crazy Horse. When I realized when I read that Crazy Horse's great love was a woman called Black Buffalo Woman. And I'm from Buffalo, you know? So I thought well this is a sign. But he was a remarkable. He was a mystic and a visionary and, and a small man who didn't look like a lot of other Lakota warriors. He never took, he took a scalp once. And things didn't go right for him, so he never took another scalp. He had visions. He wore blue all the time. He didn't ever wear a war bonnet. He always was sure that the women and children had eaten first before he would eat. He never danced in the dances. He was just a remarkable man. And he just to me is a, is a great - I, I, I like the kind of man I think Crazy Horse was.

**Host:** I think this is time to read a Crazy Horse poem which we, we had thought we might end with. But I think it should be read, read right now.

**Clifton:** Alright. Let's find it.

**Host:** It's in here.

**Clifton:** He was a, he always, it seemed to me, it's interesting that he had to deal with a second thing in life always. In that the woman who raised him was not his natural mother. He married a woman named Black Shawl although he was in love with a woman named Black Buffalo Woman. But he went away, and when he came back, she had been married to someone else. Black Shawl was pregnant. Now during another campaign he ran away for about a week with Black Buffalo Woman. And came, when they came, and they came back when he found that Black Shawl was pregnant. And he was then faithful to her. Black Shawl had a child, a daughter. He named her a wonderful name. They Are Afraid of Her. But Black Buffalo Woman was also pregnant. And they said that there was, it is said that there was in her village later a child that looked like Crazy Horse. But, but they don't know and they don't - he has no known descendants though people claim to be descendant of Crazy Horse. There are no known - because They Are Afraid of Her died as a young child. And also he never allowed himself to be photographed. There are no authentic photographs of Crazy Horse. Although there are photographs that purport to be. I just think he was remarkable. And so I, I got a feeling. And this is, this is so - I read more about him after. I do that quite often, read more about it after I get a feeling for it. And I just get a feeling for it. And I, I thought doing something in a kind of style that was Native American would be something I would be, would be interesting for me to try. So this is a poem Crazy Horse Names His Daughter. It's a chanting kind of poem, I think, anyway. And the power of naming.

Crazy Horse Names His Daughter.

Sing the names of the women. Sing the powerful names of the women. Sing White Buffalo Woman who brought the pipe. Black Buffalo Woman and Black Shawl. Sing the names of women. Sing the power of name in the women. Sing the name I have saved for my daughter. Sing her name to the ties and baskets. And the red tail hawk will take her name and sing her power to Wakan Tanka. Sing the name of my daughter. Sing she is They Are Afraid of Her. I think that's a powerful name.

And then Crazy Horse, Crazy Horse knew he was going to be betrayed. And he asked his cousins, his young men, and he was betrayed. That if they would do these things, he would come back. But if they forgot, and in their grief they did forgot. Wouldn't you know, you know? They did forget. He said that he would then wait. And when the world became, got to a perilous state, he would return. So oftentime, you know the messiah-like people are often awaited their return anyway. This is called Crazy

Horse, I've never read this, Crazy Horse Instructs the Young Men, But in Their Grief They Forget.

Cousins, if I be betrayed, paint my body red and plunge it in fresh water. I will be restored.  
If not, my bones will turn to stone, my joints to flint, and my spirit will watch and wait.  
It is more than 100 years.  
Grandmother Earth rose her shoulders in despair.  
Her valleys are flooded fresh with water and blood.  
Surely the heart of Crazy Horse must rise and re-bone itself.  
To me, my tribes, to me my horses, to me my medicine.

He was, he was remarkable. And, and the lines that, that first came to me was I, I think there was some kind of an, it wasn't an earthquake. It was some kind of flooding. And in, in reading the newspaper reports, now I'm a real newspaper person. Reading the newspaper reports, the line just came to me: surely the heart of Crazy Horse will rise and re-bone itself. And then the rest of the poem just sort of, I just stood around while it came.

**Host:** I, this is obviously a little sequence of, of Crazy Horse poems. And earlier you read from, from the same volume. Next from a sequence of daughter, woman poems. I wonder, talking about process again, how these sequences come to you.

**Clifton:** I, I find that I do - someone I think said to me, I, I took part in a reading in Baltimore once. Which was a reading of, of someone first talked about my work critically. And then I read. She was fascinating. I, you know, she said stuff I hadn't thought about. And she said that I write sequences, and I really hadn't thought about it. But it seems to me, so many times with young poets, they try to put everything in one poem. All that they've learned, all that they're experiencing, their feeling about something has to fit into this one poem. Oftentimes they write poems that are too heavy for, the poems are too light to carry what they're trying to get the poem to carry. And I can't say everything that I want to try to say in one poem about anything often. And so I end up writing several. One leads to another. There's something that I haven't, that still wants to be said. And, and so I end up writing a number of things about - I do it all the time.

**Host:** And you write them in the order they appear? One after another?

**Clifton:** No, not always. In Crazy Horse, let's see. I think The Message of Crazy Horse was the first written. And then I thought, well, I don't know exactly. I can't. You know I, I hesitate to say how, how I started thinking about something else. But, but I do know when I'm done. I do know when I have finished. There's no more waiting to be said about something. And I have sense enough - I think that's something I do have sense enough to do. I have sense enough to start at the beginning of something. Or as to start. And then I have sense enough to stop when I'm done. And I think that's -- .

**Host:** And so why you love him anyway. Why, why he speaks to you so deeply anyway. Is that there's represented in the language, the language where else you write. The language that has its, its realness in its name. The family of - the trees are the family which stands. And so on. And you're talking about the coming of someone great or someone who can live

in that world or that language greatly. And elsewhere you talk about how blackness is going to do the same thing for some people. Turn them back and -

**Clifton:** I, I want to redefine blackness. I do that in children's books as well.

**Host:** But the part, part of the, not to make this so long, but part of what I sense in this is that both ways of earth language remind us to stay in the body first and then think. And both lead us to, to the poem that is true.

**Clifton:** I hope so. That, that there's, that oh what? That maybe, maybe that things, that the thinking of things something I said to the teachers. There are lots of ways of knowing. And that it may be that one, that if, if one is better or more - one is not more valid than the other. But it may be that the one we have chosen is not the one we might have chosen. It's not the best way to know things. I heard John Haines, the poet, talking once. And he was talking about ways of knowing. And he thought that, he thought and I agree. That the way of knowing, that the lang-to know the language of books and to know the language of leaves, we may not, we may not, we may know less understanding the language printed here. Than if we understood the language here. And there is language in it all.

**Host:** I'd like to go back to the comment that you want to redefine blackness. Would you say how?

**Clifton:** Well, because, because black and dark, all these things have negative connotations. And especially with children's books. I, I can give an example from a children's book called, I think it's called Don't You Remember? And in that book, a little girl is, is annoyed because her parents keep promising her, promising to bring her a big black beautiful cake with Tate on it. Her name is Tate. In pink letters. And I know about chocolate fudge. I know about devil's food. Devil's food. But I want to have the word "black" surrounded by beautiful and big and something sweet like cake. Because these things are, are, are images that people, you know, you hear of them. But you what you hear them through your skin and everything. And it seems to me that it matters for children that the word "Black" does not have to be a negative kind of word. Darkness. I have a poem that goes, "Somebody coming in darkness like a star." It's about Christ. And it seems to me an important thing. I try to explain to my students that all this is purposeful. It's not that I didn't know about chocolate fudge. I happen to like it. But I want purposely to say "Big, black, beautiful cake." Say "coming in darkness like a star." That seems to me an important, a useful thing that I can do.

**Host:** Could you say something further about composing? You compose a lot in your head.

**Clifton:** I compose on a type, a lot in my head, and I go to a typewriter. I can't write, I can't compose longhand. I, I need to be able to see what it's going to look like. But on the other hand, all of my students use a computer. And I don't use a computer. I, and I understand that I'm old-fashioned and slow-witted. But I've always thought that the words for poems are not in computers. Now, I don't know why I think that, okay? And I suppose they're there because somebody puts them there. But I'm convinced that, that the right word for a poem isn't going to be in a computer. So I may as well do it on a typewriter.

**Host:** As Tony likes to point out, there's a wonderful subtle music in your poetry. And I wonder, do you, do you speak them orally? You know, do you compose orally, I should say? At all?

**Clifton:** No, I really don't. I, I do read them after. But I really think that a poem has to work on a page as well. I'm a page person, and I think a poem has to work on a page as well as orally. Though I do read them to hear the music. Maybe I do it in my head because I do hear the music in, in, in poems. And it's important to me that it be a, a music. And I can't, I can't say how to do that. It's just an intuitive kind of thing. I compose in my head a lot. And by the time I sit down to a typewriter, I'm not starting at A and going to Z. I'm starting at L and going to Z. And oftentimes there's not a lot to do. But I for instance, I cannot write on a paper that has - I only type with four fingers. These two and these two. And I can't compose on a piece of paper that I haven't made a mistake on. And so if I make a - and when you make a mistake on the last line, it's really a drag, you know. Because I just can't write anymore on that [inaudible]. So I have to pull it out, throw it on the floor. It's kind of, I use a lot of paper.

**Host:** Do you revise a lot?

**Clifton:** Oh my, yes. Oh, absolutely. People think I wouldn't revise. Because it's four lines, what do you do? Absolutely! Oh, everything matters. So A and An, which of those do you use? The and A. I mean, the lines, spacing, the breaks. Everything is purposeful. Absolutely everything is not, it is not casual. It's where it is because it's supposed to be there. The spaces and everything. The capitalizations. People ask me how, why I do - well, I like the way it looks with the small letters excepting for things that matter and I want to stand out. All of that is on purpose, yes.

**Host:** It would be important to our students to remember that when you say things like that, you're also saying that your thinking mind as editor has a very clear memory of the genesis of this poem without words. And so yeah.

**Clifton:** And you do have to - I mean, you use all. You know, you use. I don't wish to say that you don't have to think at all. Thinking - somebody asked me once, "Do you have something in mind when you write?" I have something in mind when I go downstairs, you know? I mean I always have something in mind. But, but it all has to fit together and work. It all works together. And you do have to work on it. And you do have to be ruthless so that you have favorite words and phrases and things that you're very fond of. I certainly do. And if they are not helping the poem, you take them out. Sometimes the, the line or phrase or word that was the genesis for the poem doesn't fit, it doesn't fit there. It, it was just helping you into the poem. You take it out and save it. But I never throw anything away. Put it somewhere else because the poem for it will show up, I guess. I hope.

**Host:** And I, I'm curious too about something you said before. Feeling sometimes that you can do some good for one or, or 1000 people. How are we doing in this business of re-becoming human beings?

**Clifton:** Well, well you know you have to be [inaudible] at this, it seems to me. You have to not be wedded to the fruits of what you do. I believe people can change. I, I believe that things can change. If you didn't believe that, why not just go somewhere and sit down? I mean I believe that as long as there are a couple of people who maintain a certain kind of vibe, the vibe is not gone from the world. And that seems to me

tremendously important. And, and that it doesn't, that it doesn't look better in my lifetime is okay. I, you know, nobody ever promised me a rose garden anyway. I, I expect that it will either be better or not. But I will at least have maintained maybe. And that's -- .

**Host:** Unfortunately we are at the end of this very interesting discussion. Could you close with a poem that I think maybe comes out of what you've been saying?

**Clifton:** Turning. This, this is interesting. This poem was, Denise [inaudible] tells me that she used this poem during a, a political campaign which is fun to me.

Turning.

Turning into my own.

Turning on in to my own self at last.

Turning out of the white cage.

Turning out of the lady cage.

Turning at last like a stem on a black fruit.

In my own season at last.

**Host:** Tony, Lucille Clifton, thank you very much for being here today.

**Clifton:** Thanks, [inaudible].

**Host:** Thank you both.

**Clifton:** Thank you.

[ Music ]

**Host:** This exclusive Brockport Writer's Forum program was recorded on video tape on November 13th, 1987 as part of The Writer's Forum, a Department of English Presentation. This has been a production of Brockport Television of the Department of Communication, State University of New York, College of Brockport.