Blessing the Boats Study Guide

Blessing the Boats by Lucille Clifton

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Plot Summary

This is a collection of free verse poetry by a black woman poet noted for her spare, powerful imagery. She has been a famous poet since the late 1980s, having received the Shelley Memorial Prize, the Charity Randall prize, the Shestack Prize from the American Poetry Review, and an Emmy Award. In addition, she has had two books of poetry chosen as finalists for the Pulitzer Prize.

These poems are gentle, pared-down, and well-crafted. Although they are free verse, they lean heavily on iambic scansion with occasional near-rhymes. They allude to persons and places personal to both the poet as well as public. They are very personal poems, made universal by the persistently kind and gentle touch of the poet.

Because this is a collection of poetry, there is no particular plot structure to the work, except that it begins with the poet's newest poems from the year 2000, then swings back to 1988 with selected poems chosen from ensuing years.

Dedication

Dedication Summary and Analysis

Clifton dedicates this volume to "Russell" who lived from 1963-1997. She includes three lines:

"the beautiful boy

has entered

the beautiful city"

These lines evidently allude to the early passing of someone beloved by the poet, someone pure and innocent and beautiful. The allusion to the "beautiful city" refers to heaven.

From *New Poems* (2000), "the times"

From New Poems (2000), "the times" Summary

This poem crafts in imagery a dreadful thing, the murder of a child by another child. Clifton says with courage and honesty that she's "relieved" that they are white, inferring that many times this kind of story is told about black children. She wants to understand but she is tired of understanding. The imagery following demonstrates that such a story is beyond understanding, that the images themselves are detached from any comprehensible meaning.

In the first four lines, everything seems frozen. The squirrel gazes with eyes that don't look away from the poet, although dogs' eyes do, inferring that the dog is feeling empathetically with the humans, showing compassion. In lines 13-18, Clifton designs disjointed images that cannot mean anything, just as a child murdering another child cannot be grasped:

"the cat would hunch across the long table

and that would mean time is catching up,"

Finally, in the last two lines, separated by a big space, Clifton transcends her first seemingly racist comment by pointing out that the dust in the street itself has spelled out the universal truth: that these are our children, that this is our child.

From New Poems (2000), "the times" Analysis

Readers often dislike this poem at first reading because it seems to contain reverse racism. Clifton feels some relief that for once, this is a murder between white children. However, the last lines reveal the more universal feeling that it doesn't matter what color the children were; they are *our* children. In fact, line 1 points out that we all have a hard time holding on to our humanity with such a terrible happening.

Because of this loss, even the alphabet, even words, lose their meaning, and certainly symbols do. Symbols such as cats and "spindle fish" receive arbitrary meanings, though they all point to what seems to be the end of the world, the end of humanity. However, the dust in the street organizes itself to provide the final meaning: that it doesn't matter what race the children are, they are our children.

The title seems to point out that this happening relates to the times that we live in, and the symbol of the spindle fish points to the end times, which relate to biblical prophecies that societies will fall apart in the "end times," the end of the world before Christ comes again. This reference reinforces the sense that Clifton is a religiously oriented writer.

From *New Poems* (2000), "signs"

From New Poems (2000), "signs" Summary

One can relate the second poem in this book to the first, in that the whole world has gone wrong. The title "signs" may refer to a biblical allusion to "signs and portents," again in relationship to the end times, when "signs" point the destruction of the world. In the first stanza, birds start to walk and crows stand right in the road watching the destruction, because things are dead and of course crows feast on the dead things. Even geese, which normally take flight in the sky, stand on the side of "highway 95," one wing and the other pointing in each direction.

The second verse links these birds to a man who bolts from his car, barely clothed, rushing into traffic, his arms outspread just like the geese in verse 1. He is "almost cawing/ almost lifting straining to fly." Perhaps he is trying to escape the end of the world.

From New Poems (2000), "signs" Analysis

The most interesting thing about this poem is the juxtaposition of the images of the birds and that of the man. The crows are humanized by being dressed in silk tuxedos, which is a lovely and accurate observation of the black shiny feathers of crows. They do seem to watch the traffic as it flows by.

The crows are clothed in tuxedos while the man is "almost naked," a nice blurring between the natural world and the so-called civilized world that becomes so mad that the man struggles to join the other, natural world. This is a poem of a world so mixed-up that nature cannot be itself, and neither can people be themselves. "Signs" is an oblique reference to the biblical notion of "signs and portents" of end times, a world upside-down, the coming apocalypse.

From *New Poems* (2000), "moonchild"

From New Poems (2000), "moonchild" Summary

This poem uses the moon as a metaphor for the poet as a baby, as a child. The round belly of the mother produces a round-headed child who, from the beginning, is held and cradled (and later troubled) by her father. Although the father makes a joke that the round head of the new baby is a moon, later the poet acknowledges that she is truly the moon, because she has dark places and secrets, although she has as much light as she can hold onto.

Later, as a young girl just ten, she joins other girls wanting round shapes for breasts, putting tissue paper in her shirt to make them. The girls are trying to be grownup and one mentions that a boy is teaching her to French kiss, although at her age, whoever it is is inappropriate. The poet thinks to herself that there is no way to say that her father is teaching her that.

Knowing that the moon is powerful, in charge of waters, the poet "blames the moon" for her tears.

From New Poems (2000), "moonchild" Analysis

The moon is typically used in literature to refer to things feminine so it is no surprise that the moon symbolizes the new baby and the birth of the baby. The round mother's belly and the round of the babe echo the full moon, which also attends full tides and regulates menstruation and therefore by association, birth. The father's initial involvement in the girl's life seems good and innocent. Later the second verse foreshadows that the girl's life is not as beautiful and innocent as it seems to start, because she is holding secrets and trying to maintain as much light as she can pull together. The third verse reveals at least part of why that is true: that the girl is being sexually abused by the father who had initially cradled and loved her.

By now the poet knows much about the moon and realizes that the moon rules the waters of the earth, including the poet's own tears. She attempts to distance herself from her own tears by blaming them on the moon.

From *New Poems* (2000), "dialysis"

From New Poems (2000), "dialysis" Summary

This is a poem about the poet's experience with the hospital, with having cancer and cancer treatment, with kidney dialysis after, and with the anger and despair of trying to heal afterwards. The first verse deals with the "thousand eyes" of the kidneys closing, refusing to work again, making the recovery so difficult. The poet is sharing a hospital suite and notices the difficulties of other patients, chronicling them dispassionately, almost in despair. She notes the blood spouting from a blind man's arm, making patterns on the floor tile, and how someone comes—not a nurse, not an orderly, just someone—and cleans it up. An old, old woman is crying for her mom. The poet notes that there is no help from anyone, even the dead.

In verse 3, the poet reflects her hate for the very things that save her, as in the last verse, when she is grateful and also furious for being alive. Verse five points out that that cure has been horrible, too, so that the body is hanging on to everything, even toxins. She dreams of the cure, that a fire has purified what was dark and made it light. She ends the poem with a familiar New Age phrase, "blessed be," including the wry phrase, "even this?" or even the cancer and its difficult cure.

From New Poems (2000), "dialysis" Analysis

It is rare to be able to see into the heart of someone who goes through cancer treatment. In this poem, the poet reveals the mixed joy and despair, the anger and the relief, of being cured from cancer. Most interesting are the references to the side effects of the treatment, including the "thousand eyes" or the nephrons of the kidneys refusing to work.

The poet gives a glimpse of the other sufferers in her hospital ward, inferring that everything they're suffering adds up to a great deal of suffering indeed. The style of these observations seems flat and passionless, as if all the feeling has been burned out along with the cancer.

There is a powerful image sequence, a dream where "something" crawls out of a burning house, clean and pure. In the dream, the poet calls it light. Finally, the poet reveals that surviving the cancer makes her so grateful and so angry. She says what survivors rarely reveal, that the experience and even surviving is brutal.

From *New Poems* (2000), "donor"

From New Poems (2000), "donor" Summary

This poem is dedicated "to lex," which from the poem we learn is the poet's thirty-year-old son. Presumably, the son has donated an organ to his mother, and this puts her in mind of the time when she found she was expecting him, when she was pregnant. She says she tried hard to get rid of him, even inserting coat hangers to dislodge the baby, taking pills, trying anything to abort. However, she says that her baby stubbornly hung on, refusing to leave her.

Even if her body rejects the transplant, she feels her son lex inside her, even now as an adult, "buckled in despite me," she says. She compares her son's tenacity for life to the frown on an angel's brow.

From New Poems (2000), "donor" Analysis

Revealing multiple attempts to abort a child to that child seems a brutal thing to do, but this poem is so tender, so loving, that it seems all right to write about it. The son, identified as "lex," has evidently donated an organ. Since the preceding poem discusses failing kidneys, we extrapolate that it is a kidney donation. The poem is almost a confessional of the mother's attempt to get rid of her baby thirty years ago. However, she delivers an image of a child, a stubborn baby, "hunched there in the dark" and insisting on birth.

The poet understands that her body may reject the kidney, but her son's attachment and "donation" to her will endure anyway. She feels lex's devotion to his life, and thus to hers, insisting on life for himself and for his mother, connected to heaven even if the connection seems like a frown, which brings to mind a little baby's typical frown, though the son is now thirty years old.

From *New Poems* (2000), "libation"

From New Poems (2000), "libation" Summary

This poem is subtitled "north Carolina, 1999," referring probably to a visit the poet has made to a slave plantation. She has brought some gin and pours it out on the ground, a religious ceremony for honoring a deity; in this case, the one honored is a man grown old in slavery, having lived his life and sacrificed everything for the slaveholders, at the end of his life ending up with nothing but tears and thirst.

The first verse mentions that she offers the gin to the ground, imagining the old man, crying in secret so the overseer will not see. The second verse mentions teeth lost, and the ache where the tooth would be, and the subsequent verse points out that the ache for the tooth is similar to the ache he feels for land, house, wife, son, and a beautiful daughter. The fourth verse equates his sorrow to his tears, and when he tastes his tears, they reflect his thirst; not just the physical thirst, but the spiritual thirst for the things he did not have in this life.

He doesn't even have a name, so the poet calls out a name that might have been his as she pours out a libation, a drink of gin on "salty ground" to honor this man's life.

From New Poems (2000), "libation" Analysis

This is a poem of compassion, of empathy. Although the poet is a modern, she can put herself into the heart of a slave, a man who didn't have the chance to realize anything of a life with choices, even to the point that he loses his family, his own wife and children. The man knows he's been cheated, as with the symbol of the missing tooth representing all the missing things, including his family. He tastes his tears, as if they are the only thing that can nourish him. His finger is "thirsty" because he cannot use his hands to do what he might choose.

The poet performs a ritual for this man, pouring out a libation, an offering, to honor his life. Interestingly, the gin that she uses would probably never have been available to the man in his life, so he receives it posthumously. He doesn't even have a name, but the poet honors him anonymously, calling out a name that might have been his, one that symbolizes all such men and women who lost the meanings of their lives through slavery.

From *New Poems* (2000), "jasper texas 1998"

From New Poems (2000), "jasper texas 1998" Summary

This poem is subtitled "for j.byrd," shortened name for James Bird, a fifty-year-old black man who was fastened to a logging chain to a pickup truck and dragged three miles in Jasper, Texas. During the ordeal, Bird was torn to pieces, including his head being torn off. This was an unspeakable crime that took a long time to punish the perpetrators. Calling him "j. byrd" is a tender naming, sounding like a nickname, "jaybird."

The first verse speaks from the point of view of first person, the man's head, chosen to speak for all the other torn members of the body, such as the arm that was torn off, still pointing toward the head, such as the hand that "opened once" in agony and was torn off. The second verse has Bird speaking directly, asking the important questions about racism: why should we continue to make relationships with those who hurt us? Who is really human, those who insist on their superiority and hurt others, or those who are hurt? The last line in the verse refers to Bird's daughter, who testified in a hearing about the torture and death of her dad.

In the third verse, the poet refers to the sun and the dirt, the dust that covers all the people, symbolizing the hatred and racism that never cease. Finally, the poet, speaking as Bird, says, "I am done," even while people sing with remaining hope, "we shall overcome."

From New Poems (2000), "jasper texas 1998" Analysis

It is an arresting image, a terrible image, a man's head speaking in the road. This head was chosen to speak by the dismembered pieces of body in the road, dragged to pieces by racists with a truck and a logging chain. Perhaps the head is speaking for all the disenfranchised people hurt and killed by racism. The first verse refers to parts of the body that accuse the tormenters even as they are ripped apart.

One of the ugly accusations of the racists is that the "others" are less than human. This poem asks the obvious question: who is human, those who kill and maim, or those who suffer? In the third verse, the physical suffering is minimized and brought to focus with a reference to the blistering sun, so hot that if Bird were alive, he couldn't stand it. The blacks in town are singing songs of hope, but hope "bleeds slowly" from Bird's mouth. There is no hope for him. He is done, in the sense that he is dead, but he is also done because there is no way to deal with the brutality of the racism around him.

From *New Poems* (2000), "Alabama 9/15/63"

From New Poems (2000), "Alabama 9/15/63" Summary

This poem starts out like a joke: "have you heard the one about...." But it is no joke. This is a poem about the four girls who were blown up in the church bombing in Birmingham, Alabama in 1963. A racist placed a dynamite bomb in the basement of a church, and the four girls lost their lives.

This poem speaks of the girls are birds who "shattered into skylarks" in the explosion. The second stanza names their names, "four little birds." The third stanza equates the bright blast of the bomb to the explosion of the girls' souls into heaven, that the sound blew their souls as well as the music of the piano into heaven in a blast so brilliant that is impossible to hear or experience.

From New Poems (2000), "Alabama 9/15/63" Analysis

Although this is a poignant and well-known story in American history, the poet introduces it lightly, almost like a joke, even though the reality is almost too horrifying to talk about, too bright, too loud. In the first stanza, the bursting apart of the children is equated to shivering, with the terrible outcome that they shall never have children. Instead, they "shattered into skylarks," another way of pointing out that the act of inhumanity resulted in the girls become something more, something other, than human children. The skylarks carry with them the music from the church, from a piano that can no longer play but whose music bursts into heaven with the girls. There is wordplay that the girls cannot play and neither can the piano.

This poem creates the unbearable feeling of the violent act of the bombing, that one cannot even talk about it in language, that the burst and the losses are beyond language.

From *New Poems* (2000), "what i think when i ride the train"

From New Poems (2000), "what i think when i ride the train" Summary

This poem begins by merging the images of the couplers' parts linking trains to the knuckles of the poet's father. She remembers his hand, "hard and black and swollen" from doing the hard work of making train parts. His hardworking hands compare to the "lugs and bolts" in a toolbox owned by a rich man.

Although in the course of his work her father suffers broken bones, one every year, the couplers he makes for trains never break. She reads about train wrecks where the couplers never break even though the trains jump the track, and thinks about her father, who made "the best damn couplers/in the whole white world." Her father has sacrificed his life doing superior work for people who never know him, white people who look down on him. But the poet draws attention to his fine work in this poem.

From New Poems (2000), "what i think when i ride the train" Analysis

Riding the train, with time to sit and ponder, the poet's mind turns to her father's work. He spends his life making the couplers that hold the train together. He is a man who works with pride and devotion to quality, although no one really knows anything about it except when a train jumps the track and the couplers hold. The poet knows, however. She knows what he sacrifices for his work, knows his hands that have become hardened and swollen over his years of work.

The poet, growing up, sees the toll the work takes on her father, who annually breaks a bone in the demands of his work. The couplers never break, a heartbreaking yet lovely juxtaposition of images. One sees the broken bone hanging loose and a train hanging loose from the tracks, held together by the superior craftsmanship of her father's work.

When she sees these things, she thinks of her father who was a "chipper," which one may assume was a positive, committed worker, who made the "best damn couplers/in the whole white world." Although the poet does not want to come across angry, she cannot help but flash her anger in the last line, because her father gives his life for people who mostly look down on him and hardly know who keeps them safe on the train.

From *New Poems* (2000), "praise song"

From New Poems (2000), "praise song" Summary

This poem tells a vignette, a tiny story in the life of a family, when a mother, the poet's Aunt Blanche, who lay down on her front lawn and rolled her "basketball of a body" into oncoming traffic. The poem becomes a song of praise, a religious experience, thanking the drivers who stopped before they ran her over, and honoring Aunt Blanche's faith for not staying down until she was indeed run over. The poem also honors the family who embraced her back into their love even though they did not know what compelled her to attempt such a suicide. Finally, the poem becomes worship as all these praiseworthy acts reflect God's reality in these people's lives.

From New Poems (2000), "praise song" Analysis

This is a gentle poem about a potentially violent incident: the poet's Aunt Blanche, so distressed over some unknown reason that she lies down and rolls herself into traffic. At first, the image seems as though she is rolling lengthwise but the image of the body as a basketball shows her in fetal position, another hint of her despair, rolling toward cars. This story puts one in mind of the story of the suburban housewife who walked out the front door one day and kept on walking then disappeared, never to return.

The poet turns the potentially disastrous situation into worship, praising and thanking God for the drivers who stopped before they ran her over, praising Aunt Blanche's faith in returning to her family despite her despair. The poem also praises her family for loving her back into the family even though they do not understand her desperate impulse. Interestingly, though Clifton almost always uses lower case in her poems, even when referring to deity, in this case she refers to God in the upper case, making it a poem of religious worship indeed.

From *New Poems* (2000), "august"

From New Poems (2000), "august" Summary

This is a poem of grief, of regret of losing a brother, named sam in the poem. The poem addresses the poet's sister laine, for whom the poem is dedicated, in grief. She asks what would they give just to have him back, in his foolishness, in his weakness, in his sins, "not clean, not sober," but alive? The poem visualizes the sisters rolling the brother back onto a bed, implying that he has fallen off perhaps not only the bed but also "the wagon." The brother "clasped his hands" though not praying but seeming to and "melted" to their mother, as addicts often do, falling back into the safe home, back to the parents who may take care of them even though they have messed up again. The poet would "staple" him back into the family's arms, this brother she calls their "honey boy," just as he is, only still alive.

From New Poems (2000), "august" Analysis

This poem implies an overdose or suicide of a beloved but troubled brother. This poem addresses the poet's sister, Laine, as they both grieve for a lost brother. They have had the experience of having to roll him into bed, high on drugs, but even though they had to take care of him, they at least had him in their arms, "stapled," which gives the sense that they are holding on to him for dear life. This is a crying poem, a grieving poem, of losing someone so dear that one cannot deal with the grief of losing him. Even though they have to "fuss with him," both literally as in taking care of him and figuratively as in having to nag him, they would rather do that than lose him to the overdose or suicide.

It is a powerful image, that Sam clasps his hands to his body and falls into his mother, as a desperate appeal for help and perhaps as a result of the drugs. The poet indicates that she would love to hold him this way, just to have him back, just as he was, not demanding that he change his ways but just to have him alive.

From *New Poems* (2000), "study the masters"

From New Poems (2000), "study the masters" Summary

This is a poem about the poet's Aunt Timmie, who irons linen for a living. She takes in laundry so no one really knows whose sheets she is ironing, but the poem supposes that Aunt Timmie has ironed sheets belonging to a master poet, whether it was for his home or hotel. The poet dreams, lying on the sheets, and the poet notes that Aunt Timmie dreams too, in her ancestral languages, sometimes Cherokee, sometimes Masai, and sometimes the universal language that will take one beyond one's circumstances: hope.

Aunt Timmie chants as she irons, revealing artistic concepts that the poet and other artists would know, such as "form and line and discipline and order." Further, Aunt Timmie's chanting reveals "America," which means that she believes that someday, somehow, she will transcend this job of ironing into doing work more congruent with her own dreams. The poem does not necessarily say whether Aunt Timmie did transcend, but infers it.

From New Poems (2000), "study the masters" Analysis

The images in this poem are a lovely transposition of the horizontal movements of ironing and "line and form" in art and in poetry. The poem gives the sense that the finished ironed linens are beautiful and artistic in themselves, and that they hold the chants, the incantations, the beliefs, and the hopes of Aunt Timmie, whose dreams and chants go far beyond the mundane act of ironing. She keeps doing this repetitive work even though her hope and belief in the promise of America tell her that she can go beyond it. The poem doesn't reveal whether she does transcend it, but even without that knowledge, her chanting and ironing already demonstrate mastery of artistic principles, just as a master poet knows them.

From *New Poems* (2000), "lazarus, first day"

From New Poems (2000), "lazarus, first day" Summary

This is the first in a series of poems about Lazarus, who was raised by Jesus from the dead in the New Testament. In this poem about the first day, Lazarus is already moving from the mortal sphere toward "the light"; in this case, a "pin of light", and someone's voice beckoning him away from the mortal world into the next. He moves there along a "river of sound," perhaps floating, perhaps swimming, until he hears another voice, as the scriptures say, "Lazarus, come forth." Instead of leaving this world, Lazarus reverses direction and comes back. When he emerges, he finds himself immersed in the very same sounds that took him away. The singing of Mary and Martha, combined with the voice of Jesus, the sounds that brought him back, are the very same voice as the river of sound that took him away.

From New Poems (2000), "lazarus, first day" Analysis

This is a poem about spiritual experience. The poet experiences with Lazarus what it is to die, to leave this world, to go away from mortality into "the light." Lazarus is travelling this journey along a "river of sound" when he is called back. He returns by "twisting into the light," a nice contraposition to the smooth floating he was doing on the river toward eternity. When he emerges, he is prone, with Mary and Martha at his head and feet, and by inference Jesus there as well. He hears them singing his name, and the sound and feeling are the same as the "river of sound" that was floating him toward eternity.

The poet has placed herself in the experience of Lazarus: what it's like to die and move from the mortal world into the eternal world. Lazarus sees himself moving toward light, which many people who have had near-death experiences report. At first, the light is just a pinpoint, but it grows larger as he moves along what he calls a river of sound, which takes him toward eternity. When he is called back by Jesus' voice, the voice and the singing of the women give him the exact same experience as the sound of eternity. This sensory exploration of death and life and spirit is delightful and satisfying to read. It is easy to believe that Lazarus had this kind of experience when he was called back.

From *New Poems* (2000), "lazarus, second day"

From New Poems (2000), "lazarus, second day" Summary

This short poem of just ten short lines explains what Bible readers may not have really thought about all these centuries: being called back from the dead changed Lazarus. He knows that he is not the same person that was carried into the cave tomb. True, there have been plenty of people who report near-death experiences, and Lazarus refers to these. He knows that he has changed. He "walked into the light" and came back from it. He is another man.

From New Poems (2000), "lazarus, second day" Analysis

This poem is short, revealing Lazarus' lack of understanding, just yet, of what happens with him. He knows that he is changed but he hasn't figured it all out yet. Not only is he different to himself, but he is different to everyone else, because all know that he was dead and now he is alive. He seems to be uncertain whether this is a good thing for himself. He is going toward the light, which we assume is a good thing, and he is pulled back from it back into mortality. Perhaps this is not such a good thing, Lazarus seems to be thinking, but he says few words about it here.

From *New Poems* (2000), "lazarus, third day"

From New Poems (2000), "lazarus, third day" Summary

This poem continues the exploration setup in the previous poem. Lazarus is still confused and not totally pleased at being brought back. He keeps thinking about what he was "moving from" and what he was "moving toward," and he can't figure out the relationship between the two worlds since he didn't get to completely enter the eternal world. When he was dead, he was hyper-aware of everything, even "the seeds/turning in the grass," but now he sits on a rock, in a crevice but not buried anymore in a cave. Everyone stares at him, for he was dead. He tries to answer their questions. He warns the sisters, Mary and Martha, to stay away from him. He knows their request has brought him back, and he is not entirely pleased with that knowledge.

From New Poems (2000), "lazarus, third day" Analysis

Lazarus seems to feel cheated in this poem. Most people feel that the eternal world, perhaps called heaven, is better place than this mortal world, and Lazarus *almost* got there, but was torn back into this world at the last moment. He is sitting in the crevice of a rock near the cave, perhaps symbolizing that he wishes he could re-enter the cave and go back to eternity. When he was dead, he was so much more aware of everything, even the sounds of the seeds turning in the grass. He hates being stared at by the curious, having to answer questions that he really doesn't know the answer to. He is put off, even angry, at the sisters whose importuning brought him back. He warns them away. He fully entered the grave, and he embraced that. Now that he is back, he doesn't know how to be back. There is resentment here and he warns the two women away from him and his bitterness.

From *New Poems* (2000), "birthday 1999"

From New Poems (2000), "birthday 1999" Summary

This is a very personal poem; the poet's revealing what it's like after a hysterectomy, the strange, repeating dreams that have followed the operation. The poem is written on or in honor of her birthday. In the dream, the poet knows a train is coming toward her or for her. She explains her experience of knowing it by mostly mixing senses: she hears with her fingers, her knees, and the void where there used to be her uterus. She is standing on a train platform waiting, surrounded by people she cannot see. The bright light of the train comes to her through the sense of hearing; however, she can almost reach out and touch, with the actual sense of touch, a "cracked seat" marked with her name.

She cannot stand this experience. She feels someone should be with her, should undress her, should caress her, even though time seems too short as the train gets nearer and nearer. She has this dream more and more, she says.

From New Poems (2000), "birthday 1999" Analysis

Because this poem is written in commemoration of the poet's birthday and after a hysterectomy, one may infer that the symbol of the train is the end of the poet's life. The ominous feeling of the poem reinforces this inference. Even as the poet dreams or recalls the dream, her senses are mixed up; she hears a light and feels with her tactile sense the visual image of a train. She knows that there is a place for her on this train, a cracked seat, which infers long use by many people, with her name on it. She longs for the days when she was loved and caressed, but the hysterectomy seems to have shortchanged her on this score. She dreams that the train is getting closer and closer and she dreams it more and more often. The dreamlike quality of the poem and the inevitability of the train create a very eerie, uncomfortable experience, as though the train truly is death approaching.

From *New Poems* (2000), "grief"

From New Poems (2000), "grief" Summary

This is a poem about pain and the grief that follows. In typical Clifton fashion, the poet links in biblical themes rendered in a vital, personal way. She imagines the brand-new world, theretofore without pain, so when God pulls a rib from Adam, it causes great pain not only to Adam but even to the grass beneath him, since until now nothing in the world has experienced grief, sorrow, pain or distress. One never thinks of it, but the poem reminds us that Adam suffered with this loss of rib and bled into the grass, moaning.

This experience of pain and grief reaches from that first day with Adam until now, not only "upright animals," that is, humans, in grief and pain, but also the plants suffering, which Clifton calls "the horizontal world." The suffering zooms into the present and the present place of America, where people of all different colors, which Clifton relates to Joseph's coat of many colors, another biblical reference, suffer together in a myth, ostensibly that those people can be equal, which is the promise of America, inferred here but not kept.

A girl has been born handicapped, having twelve fingers, but she is so hardened to her situation that she cannot even cry, even though her pain segues into all the pain of the world, vertical and horizontal, from Adam until now. Because at present the world suffers the most, being the most abused and polluted, there is that much more to grieve for, but this handicapped girl cannot do it.

The poem ends in another garden, "the garden of regret," the end of a life still fraught with grief and pain, back to the grass that suffered under Adam's burden and still suffers under Adam's children, back to the grief and pain of all things human and all things that are not human.

From New Poems (2000), "grief" Analysis

This poem is rooted in the poet's biblical background, taking literally that Adam, the first man, actually suffered a bleeding pain when his rib was literally pulled out or cut out by God in order to form a woman. Adam lies on fresh new grass that has never suffered a moment before this one, just as Adam has never suffered before this. In order to have a woman, inferring a companion, inferring a life and future, Adam has to suffer a great deal. Similarly, the grass begins to suffer under humanity and continues to suffer until the present. The poem fast-forwards to the present, through "fields of lost and found," inferring that there may have been good and positive and peaceful times, but they are always swallowed up in bad times causing suffering for all humans and all things non-human, the natural world.

The poem asks the reader to "pause," inferring prayer or meditation, to pray for the human condition, people of many colors and conditions, but all suffering just as Adam

suffered. The poem asks the reader to pause once more for the "myth of America," inferring that although there is promise for equality and happiness, none is there. This line repeats twice, as a mourner's dirge. The poem refers to a girl born handicapped who suffers so much indignity that she cannot feel for the pain of others, or the pain of the earth, even though it is so great.

Finally, at the end of a life, the poem returns to a garden image, but this seems to be an older and perhaps ruined garden, filled with regret and a bell ringing out grief and pain. The bell, like the pause of the prayer above, rings out for the sadness of the world both human and pre-human, for the grass, which is a symbol for the natural world. The words in the third stanza, "the horizontal world," also symbolize the natural world.

Although this poem addresses pain and grief, it is not a poem of self-pity but rather a call for compassionate pity, a call for called-for grief, appropriate grief, appropriate mourning. The poet does not blame or rage against those who cannot keep the promise of America, but she does not let the truth slide by, either. By referring to the Bible, she places these human experiences of grief and pain in the larger relation to the plan of the world, since God himself began the whole thing by slashing out Adam's rib. This is not a cheerful poem, but it connects us to our own grief and pain and requests us to honor those who have suffered.

From *New Poems* (2000), "report from the angel of eden"

From New Poems (2000), "report from the angel of eden" Summary

This is a charming poem, again Bible-based, discussing what theologians have studiously ignored: that Adam and Eve had sex. This poem imagines that having sex was part of the process of the fall as well as the process of creating the earth.

An angel from heaven observes this process. S/he notes that "rubbing against the leaves" showed the "nubs" of Adam's and Eve's angel wings under their skin. The angel suggests that the sex looks like dancing but s/he knows it is not dancing. It looks like praise but if it is, it is not praise of God. As the pair make love, the grass grows rich at the same time as their halos fade away. As they make love, everything flourishes and flowers around them and the world is born. The angel feels the power of sex, and fears not only for Adam and Eve's eternal lives but for his own. S/he knows that there is the inherent chance of doing evil with sex, almost the certainty of that. S/he knows that the creation is out of God's hands now and wonders what it will become.

From New Poems (2000), "report from the angel of eden" Analysis

Bible readers rarely discuss the obvious fact of Adam and Eve having sex. This poem approaches the subject from the point of view of an observing angel. The activity of sex looks a lot like praise and worship to the angel, like the dance of praise that angels perform in heaven. However, the angel is fully aware that although this dance of sex has great power, it is not about God's power.

This power is so strong that it creates the new world around the new couple. The grass grows green and lush and the flowers bloom. Everything comes to life and "the world is born." However, the angel, feeling this power, is afraid because the power leaves God and becomes strong for Adam and Eve, for the new mortals creating their new world through making love. The angel feels the potential for evil as well as the great good of creation. S/he almost forgets who s/he is, but comes to his/her senses and returns back to God. S/he still has wings, but there is the inference that s/he too could lose them by the enticement of sex and mortal love. Leaving Paradise, the angel will never know the answer to his/her question: what will become of the new world, of the new paradise?

From *next* (1988), "album"

From next (1988), "album" Summary

This poem is dedicated to Lucille Chan Hall, a childhood friend of Clifton. In the photo album, the poet looks at an early photo. In stanza 1, the photos are from 1939. The two Lucilles are having their hair curled by their mothers who wind the hair around rags in the practice of the time. The girls are having a drink from "shirley temple" cups and the girls drink it all up, inferring that they absorb and agree to all the inferences of wanting to be like the ideal Shirley Temple. Stanza 2 shows the perfect curls on the two girls. The intervening unnumbered stanza reveals that the two girls reject this image of perfection as they grow up. In 1958 and '59, in stanza 3, the girls have had children. The mothers hope that the girls will become their own selves instead of idealized Shirley Temple. In 1985, in stanza 4, the poet cryptically says that each one has indeed become her own self and that together they are new, true selves.

From next (1988), "album" Analysis

This poem addresses the strange era of post World War II, where everyone had a clear idea of what was beautiful, embodied by the white, blond curled child, Shirley Temple. Nobody seemed to question whether this ideal was particularly good or if it was good for everyone. Instead, as in the last line of stanza 1, the girls drink it all up from their shirley temple cups. Stanza 2 shows that the curls have taken but are fading. The intervening verse indicates that there had to be a transition from this false ideal. The verse is not numbered. The transition includes even painful stuff such as bound feet and accepting that one's hair will be "nappy."

In stanza 3, the women have had children but the poet chooses the odd phrase, "dropped daughters," again reverting to the basics of life, trying to find the central, basic meaning of things. The daughters are "afrikan," again straight to the source, and "chinese." The mothers hope for their beauty and even more that the daughters will not want to be shirley temples, that they will want to become their true selves. Stanza 4 reveals that by 1985 each one has truly become so, but the words are short, cryptic, possibly revealing that the whole truth of each girl, and of the girls together, is so huge that it can only be expressed in the shortest of phrases.

From *next* (1988), "why some people be mad at me sometimes"

From next (1988), "why some people be mad at me sometimes" Summary

This is a very short poem, five short lines. It speaks from the point of view of a young black kid who resists the establishment's efforts to make its world the world of the speaker. Instead, the speaker remains firm in remembering things the way they were for him or her.

From next (1988), "why some people be mad at me sometimes" Analysis

From the outset, this is a poem with the voice of a young kid from a poor neighborhood since it uses the unconventional form of "be." As young as the speaker is, s/he knows that what people are teaching him/her is not the way it really is. S/he stays firm in remembering things the way they are to him/her. This is a sweet, young, hopeful poem, standing for the idea that people don't have to be indoctrinated but can firmly stand, sometimes stubbornly, in their own realities, even if people "be" mad at them.

From *next* (1988), "sorrow song"

From next (1988), "sorrow song" Summary

This is another poem of grief and mourning. The central image is of the eyes of children, those who suffered, along with their parents, in episodes of hate, racism, prejudice and torture. This poem is written for the eyes of children who were the last to die, or in the poet's words, the last to melt, to vaporize, possible referring directly to the holocaust. She writes this poem for the children of the holocaust, the children who suffered in the Viet Nam war, the children who suffered with racist killings in South Africa, those who died in the atomic bombing in Japan, those who suffered and died on the slave ships to America, for children of American Indians, for children of starving people in Africa—and then for children everywhere, those in Russia, those in America, those everywhere that grow up a world that allows suffering and unkindness, which is all of us "ordinary men."

From next (1988), "sorrow song" Analysis

This poem begins in a way that makes one think it will be an outcry against racism and interpersonal cruelty. The poem is dedicated to the eyes of children, because children are born innocent and yet must soon suffer because of the terrible choices of adults. Clifton lists the children who suffer, including those who perished in the Nazi camps, those who died and suffered in the Viet Nam War, those who experienced the killings and prejudice of South Africa, those who died in the atomic bombing of Japan in World War II, and those who were stolen into slavery and often perished on the terrible slavery voyages of Middle Passage. Then she takes the images further, because children everywhere are exposed to horrible, inhumane acts, yet they must continue living somehow. By the end of the poem, the poet includes the eyes of all children who grow up knowing that even the people they know, "ordinary" people, can do terrible evil.

From *next* (1988), "female"

From next (1988), "female" Summary

This is a poem about the bewildering subject of birth. Women often have babies and don't understand the meaning or power of it, but Clifton reveals it simply, clearly, and beautifully in this poem. Giving birth is a power that women are born with. Women do not have to learn this; it is an "amazon" in women. It is a power that opens women up and makes them strong. Being born female gives women this birthright and it separates women from men so that they have an inherent mystery, which is revealed in a smile.

From next (1988), "female" Analysis

Without coming out and explicating the question, Clifton answers one of the deep and difficult questions of womanhood, a possible source of her power. Inherent in this question are the social and relationship inequities that women often experience. This poem answers the question elegantly with the image of women smiling their mysterious smiles. Giving birth opens the power of an "amazon" in women, giving them strength far beyond themselves. Women do not have to seek this power, according to this poem, because it is a "secret we do not/have to learn." This poem performs one of the wonderful functions of art, asking a difficult question and answering it with simple language and spare imagery.

From *next* (1988), "my dream about being white"

From next (1988), "my dream about being white" Summary

This poem has the quality of a dream with disconnected images, passages of feelings, strange connections. For example, it begins with "hey music," as a recognition of music playing suddenly in the dream. She hears music and sees herself, only as a white person, and she sees her hair not her regular color but a "flutter" the color of autumn leaves, which would be yellow or red or orange. She has a perfect nose and "no lips/no behind," all of these stigmas of black appearance, the nose, the lips, and the wide bottom. The poet adds that in addition to all these physical characteristics, in the typical fashion of dreams, she is wearing, metaphorically, history as seen from the point of view of white people.

She must wake up, at least partially, because she realizes that wearing white history has no future, not for her, so she takes off the clothes of white history and wakes up fully, "dancing."

From next (1988), "my dream about being white" Analysis

This is the first in a series of poems about the poet's dreams. This poem beautifully evokes the dream state, where one sees and feels images that might not make full sense if we were completely awake. The poet seems to be aware, all of a sudden, that there is music playing, and more than that, she's there, too. She's not her real self, however, but a white person, including the wrong color and texture of hair. It is so strange that instead of using hair words, the poet calls her hair "a flutter of/fall leaves," the fall leaves perhaps symbolizing a dying, perhaps the end of a dream when a young person realizes that her youthful desires for herself don't work well for herself as a more mature woman.

In the dream, the poet has the perfect facial features and body of a fashionable white girl. No matter that most people, white or black, don't have these features; when we are young, these are the things we want. Symbolically, this perfect white girl is wearing "white history," a dress that goes along with the theoretical perfection of these features. The poet symbolically wakes up enough to see that these clothes hold no future for her so she casts them off. Now she is naked, having thrown off the images and clothing of a perfection that isn't so perfect for her after all. Free of these burdens, she can wake up fully and do it "dancing," or moving in joy and freedom at looking like her real self and feeling like her real self.

From *next* (1988), "my dream about the cows"

From next (1988), "my dream about the cows" Summary

This is a poem about a recurring dream. The poet rushes into the dream with the conjunction "and," seeing the cattle of her town, cows that have been rustled or stolen. The cowboys smell wrong, and they have shoved the cows into permanent pens. The cows are thin and "weeping low," a nice pun on the sound of cows. They live in fields that provide hardly any living and so they don't produce milk. They stand but barely so. Immediately she realizes that these cows equal despair, a personal despair, and she begins to descend into her usual despair until she realizes that she's having the dream about cows once more.

From next (1988), "my dream about the cows" Analysis

This is another poem in the dream series. This poem evokes the hopelessness of slavery, symbolized by the "pale cowboys" who have stolen cows and locked them into a dark, hungry, uncomfortable place they can never escape. They are so deprived that they cannot even perform their natural functions in life, producing milk. They are "weeping low," partly an echo of the lowing of cows and partly staying quiet in order not to offend the pale cowboys, and partly perhaps as a symbol of being brought low.

Even though they have been brought low, they somehow remain standing, though just barely. Immediately this experience of cows becomes personal and evokes the familiar despair the poet has known forever. Before she becomes entirely immersed in this despair, she wakens enough to know that she's having her same familiar dream again, the dream of cows, which represent all the trapped oppression she and her people have experienced.

From *next* (1988), "my dream about time"

From next (1988), "my dream about time" Summary

This is classic dream imagery, a person who is not even yourself running down the hallways of a long house, a place without any life in it. The strange house has "too many" windows and each one looks out on such a strange world that the poet cannot even speak about it, having no "language" for it. She doesn't approach any door except the last one, which she reaches and opens. Inside is a room with every wall covered with clocks and just as she looks into the room, they all strike. Instead of striking the hour, they strike a word, "NO."

From next (1988), "my dream about time" Analysis

This is a pure dream, nonlinear, non-narrative. In it, the poet traverses the endless hallway of an impossibly long house. The house probably symbolizes the experience of a minority person living in a majority society, where you can go from door to door to door and look through countless windows and never find a place for yourself.

She just keeps running through the house and doesn't dare to open a door. Finally, she comes to the very end of the house and decides she might as well open that door. She summons her courage, grabs hold the door, and pulls it open. It opens on a room full of clocks, symbolizing, as the title of the poem says, time. However, time has a bad message for the poet. It shouts "NO" to her, letting her know that no matter how hard she tries, that it will never be time for her to do, to be, to try, to become what she wants.

From *next* (1988), "my dream about falling"

From next (1988), "my dream about falling" Summary

This poem is a mixture of dream imagery and conceptual thought. In the dream, the woman is falling. She calls herself fruitful and in the dream, she notices she is an apple.

She has thought that the blossom (of the apple, presumably) was for always and that the tree would be always fruitful, like herself. However, she realizes that the falling is factual, for sure, but that the tree is only part of the dream.

From next (1988), "my dream about falling" Analysis

This is not a literal poem. It lives in its images and how they roll through the poet's understanding. She knows she is a fruitful woman, which can be literal, as in motherhood, or symbolic, as in the creative work that she does. She feels that she is falling, a very common dream symbol or experience, one that most people have known in dreams. As she falls, she realizes that she is an apple falling from a tree. She notes that she thought that the tree would always be in bloom, always be in fruit, but now she knows that is not true. She has thought that the tree was fruitful, a woman like herself, but now she is not sure about anything about this tree. She simply knows that she is falling. The tree in the dream, whatever it symbolizes, disappears, but the sense of falling leaves, presumably as the poet awakens.

From *next* (1988), "my dream about the second coming"

From next (1988), "my dream about the second coming" Summary

In this dream, the Christ child is born to an old woman, called Mary, as was her predecessor, a woman who doesn't believe that she is really going to give birth to the Messiah. She knows that no man has touched her and so she cannot believe that her belly is beginning to "bubble." Her hair is returning to its natural, dark color and she receives a "stranger" that she has been waiting for a long time, and he comes "dressed in lights." This Mary is old now, and she doesn't believe any of it. Nor does she believe when "Something," capitalized to signify the Messiah, "drops" on her toes, meaning giving birth. She says it is a fox, but she is willing to feed it and take care of it.

From next (1988), "my dream about the second coming" Analysis

In this poem, an indeterminate amount of time has passed since the first coming and now it is time for the second coming. The second Messiah is coming in the same way as the first, born to a woman; only in this case, the woman is old. She cannot believe that she is going to have a baby, not only because she is old but also because a man has never touched her. The pregnant belly is rendered as a "bubble." As the woman gestates, she loses her characteristics of aging, and her hair turns from "snow" to darker and younger. She knows that the angel from the previous Incarnation has visited her in the form of a stranger, and she is expecting him once more, only this time he comes to her kitchen table, symbolizing again the everyday, customary nature of the visit, only this time "dressed in light," more obviously an angel. When she bears the baby, she "drops" it, as an animal might bear its young. Indeed, she thinks it is a fox, but she is willing to take care of it. The baby is a "Something," which means that the poet doesn't know who it is but she knows it is something special. The symbol of fox has no particular theological or literary precedents, but it means something to the poet relevant to the Messiah.

From *next* (1988), "my dream about God"

From next (1988), "my dream about God" Summary

This dream poem lays out images of the poet's dream of God, presumably a sleeping dream. The first image may be familiar to many, an image where God looks like a grandfather or father. God wears the poet's grandfather's hat and he is tall, more so than the poet's "last" uncle. God listens, presumably to prayers, by leaning forward in a chair. Oddly, the poet's father cups God's chin, and the hand resembles her father's hand, damaged from years of hard work, correlative to "creation" here. God's fingers drum on His knee just as her father's did.

The last two stanzas address the poet's relationship to God. She says that she merits His attentions because she remains at home "sewing," speaking so low, in the womanly manner, that He must strain to listen to her. However, the last two lines reveal her woman's power, in that in this dream, God does whatever she says.

From next (1988), "my dream about God" Analysis

This dream poem deftly explores the poet's experience of God and in extension, people's general experience with God. Typical of such experience, God looks a lot like the men in the poet's family, dressed like the grandfather, tall like an uncle, hands like her father. God moves like her father, cupping a chin, drumming fingers on a knee, leaning on two legs of a chair as He listens. The poet moves beyond people's typical experience of God-as-father, however, when she explores her relationship to God. In the dream and in the poem, the poet is a good female role model, staying at home "sewing," a symbol for quiet, non-intrusive womanly behavior. She speaks very quietly, even in a whisper, as a "good" woman was traditionally to do. However, in a lovely ironic twist at the end of the poem, God "strains" to listen to her, and does whatever she says.

Unlike many of Clifton's poems, this one uses capital letters to refer to God either as a name or as a pronoun, indicating her reverence and belief in Him.

From *next* (1988), "my dream about the poet"

From next (1988), "my dream about the poet" Summary

This is an extended image of the poet's dream of a poet. She sees the image and thinks it is a man holding a piece of wood, a carving. He speaks to the dreamer, the poet, telling her that he is carving a world with citizens, trees, and other things he would put into a world. When someone tells him it is no world but just a poet, he laughs, or at least the poet thinks he is laughing.

From next (1988), "my dream about the poet" Analysis

This is a poet discussing, slant-wise, the role of the poet, the artist, creating a world with his art. In this poem, Clifton sees the poet as a man, just as she sees God in the role of a man in the adjacent poem. This poet sits casually, carving wood into shapes and characters that he perceives to be a world. Someone tells the poet it's only a poem, but the poet laughs at that idea, symbolizing his knowledge that the work is much more than a poem. There is a school of thought in the arts that the artist, the poet, really changes the world with his or her work. This poem reflects that concept.

From *next* (1988), "the death of thelma sales"

From next (1988), "the death of thelma sales" Summary

Clifton's maiden name was Thelma Sayles. This poem is about leaving that child behind, acknowledging her, including her, but eventually letting her go. To talk to this left-behind child, the poet leaves no tracks so the ones she loves now cannot follow her there. She meets the child at the river, a place so fearsome and powerful that most people cannot stay there but "shiver" and turn away. However, the child is strong enough to stand the experience. She stands by herself on the bank of that river just watching.

The poet takes her heart out of her pocket and throws it to the waiting child. She is happy to see the child catch the throw and take what she can from it, heading home for her children. The poet whispers to the child that being a mother has made her heart strong.

From next (1988), "the death of thelma sales" Analysis

In typical Clifton style, her maiden name is respelled from Sayles to sales. This is a poem about joining together aspects of the little girl Clifton was with the woman she has become at age fourty-four, according to the subtitle of the poem.

Clifton wants to deal with these issues without muddying them with her present love relationships. She comes to deal with her former self, her child, without leaving any way for others to participate. The little girl is a strong person, someone who can face difficulties without flinching. The river is a symbol for those kinds of things, a situation so difficult that most people tremble and turn away.

The poet gives the little girl her heart. This may symbolize the popular concept of honoring and incorporating the inner child, or it may simply be the poet's acknowledgement of all that the child went through growing up; even though, as the poem's title indicate, she is now dying. Readers will understand that Thelma Sayles had a hard time of being a child, a black girl in a prejudiced world. This poem shows readers that the adult poet integrates those hard things by growing strong. The last two lines show how mothering has made Clifton strong. This may include mothering her real child but also this inner child, bearing her maiden name.

From *next* (1988), "lives"

From next (1988), "lives" Summary

This poem plays with the concept of previous incarnation, previous lives. It speaks from the point of view of someone answering a friend or client who has inquired about past lives; the subtitle indicates that the questioner is named "lu."

In the first stanza, the poet addresses lu and tells her she was in a past life, a simple fisherman who worked hard all his life but still didn't make ends meet. His son was swimming, in trouble, close to drowning, and the fisherman swam toward him, trying to rescue him, but drowned.

In the second stanza, lu was a doctor, resentful, living in an unpleasantly cold climate. This doctor turned his or her bitterness into hate and criminality, to murder, eventually being punished by death for the crimes.

The final verse pokes a little fun at people who think they were great and royal in their past lives. Clifton says that the royals really look down and superciliously smile at us when we think we were part of them. The poem says that lu did exist in the time of the queen of sheba, but she was not a royal then. The last line points out that lu is truly royal now, not back then.

From next (1988), "lives" Analysis

This poem is dedicated "to lu in answer to her question." Is lu the poet herself or another person? It is unclear from the context of the poem, which in itself is charming, wry, and also piercing. Most people exploring the concept of past lives "find out" that they were great princes, rich tyrants, and other splendid notables. This poem points out that it is hardly possible that everybody was so royal. In the first stanza, the poet notes that lu was a poor fisherman who never could earn enough money to support his family, that eventually he died trying to rescue his son from drowning. The second stanza shows lu as a doctor who became so bitter that he lost his mind and became a murderer, ending up on a scaffold. The third stanza says directly that the royals who moderns aspire to be simply smile at this nonsense. Lu was never such a one, though now he is a royal person indeed.

From *next* (1988), "the message of thelma sayles"

From next (1988), "the message of thelma sayles" Summary

This poem addresses a girl. The speaker is ostensibly "thelma sayles," which is the maiden name of the poet. However, the context of the poem seems to be the poet's mother. Whoever the speaker is, it is a woman whose husband left her early in life. She hoped to have another man come into her life, waiting twenty years, but no one came. The second stanza addresses epileptic fits, which comes as a surprise to the speaker. The first fit is so strong that the bed breaks and the sufferer awakes bloody and with a swollen tongue. She asks herself if this was a religious experience. The third verse says that eventually the fits kill the speaker. From the other side, from the grave, the speaker tells her daughter to use such experiences to make poetry, that the blood "that clots on your tongue" becomes poems.

From next (1988), "the message of thelma sayles" Analysis

The tone of this poem is so sad. The speaker has passed on and gives understanding and advice to her daughter from beyond the grave. The poem opens with an apostrophe, "baby," indicating that the speaker is talking to her daughter. The speaker has been abandoned for a lifetime. She has suffered from epilepsy, which is hard to understand and which the speaker attributes to possible religious experience: "am i the bride of Christ?" the epileptic fits are so bad that eventually the speaker dies from them. She knows that her daughter will suffer too and tells her to turn the suffering into poems. She repeats "poems" twice to settle the beauty and belief of the poems into her daughter's ears. There is a symbol of a door in the poem, indicating the speaker's openness to a man, who never comes. There is also understatement: "the first fit broke my bed," indicating the extreme violence of her experience, even though she says it quietly, even lightly.

From *next* (1988), "the death of fred clifton"

From next (1988), "the death of fred clifton" Summary

The subtitle of this poem indicates the date of the poet's husband's death and his age. However, the poem speaks from the point of view of the deceased in the moment of his dying. It tenderly enters into the mind and spirit of Fred Clifton, the poet's husband, as he dies.

He describes it as being drawn into the center of himself, even though his "edges" remain in the hands of his wife. Now he sees everything with wonderful clearness. He can see beyond physical seeing. The death process spins him out of his skin, and now he can see everything; not just the "shapes of things," but the real things themselves, with spiritual sight.

From next (1988), "the death of fred clifton" Analysis

This poem is a refreshing departure from the typical voice of the grieving wife. Instead, Clifton reaches beyond her own experience into that of her husband, who is leaving the mortal sphere and entering the spiritual world. He spins out of his body, twisting and rising up, and then he can see things as they really are, an allusion to 1 Corinthians 13:12. The poet demonstrates such tenderness, compassion, and pure love that the reader's heart feels the sweet connection between the husband and wife. The last two lines reveal that complete, kind understanding: "oh, at last, the things/themselves."

From *next* (1988), "shapeshifter poems"

From next (1988), "shapeshifter poems" Summary

This is a series of poems about abuse, using the image of a shapeshifter, which in science fiction or fantasy writing means someone who can change into an animal shape, often but not always at will, usually for evil purposes. The first verse, labeled 1, addresses a legend of the shapeshifter, based on lore in "the women's tent," which would place it in tribal societies, where women retreat to a special tent for their periods. This verse blames the moon for shapeshifting, because the moon enters into men, actually "following some men into themselves," which places the blame upon the men as well. Although they shapeshift for a short time, it is "dreadful," because the men aren't themselves. They "wear strange hands" and walk through the homes at night, and their daughters know them as strangers.

The second verse, labeled 2, directly addresses abuse of a daughter by her father. The poem asks who will be there to protect her, especially since her father is the one causing the problem. The windows will not protect her, although they see what is going on. The moon can see, too, but does not protect her. The adult woman the girl will eventually be cannot come and protect her now. The verse fragments into inarticulate phrases as the girl suffers the abuse. Her tongue is "scarred" and she hoots like an owl, asking who will protect her. The owl cries into the evening, asking who will protect the child. The last line protests her innocence all in one cry, calling her a "prettylittlegirl."

Verse three, labeled 3, speaks from the viewpoint of the abused child. She thinks that if she lies still enough, "shut" and "hard" enough, that the shapeshifter may not come into her room. The moon will not find him there. The last image shows his hair "bristling" and "rising" up, suggesting that the rising is not hair but his penis.

Verse four, labeled 4, reveals powerfully the little girl's experience of abuse. She has the power to "breathe" a poem into her pillow but not say it aloud. She can think about the experience in some ways, especially looking back on the experience. She can call it a war poem, a political poem, but even as she names the poem these ways, she knows it is more than that. She knows it is a true poem but it cannot really address the enormity of the experience of abuse. Thus, we have the first and last lines, that it is "the poem at the end of the world," because abuse is so overwhelming that there is no other way to describe it.

From next (1988), "shapeshifter poems" Analysis

Even the title of this series of poems, each printed separately on one page, reveals the inability of a survivor to directly address the horror of being abused by one's own father. Rather than recognizing the father as the perpetrator, the poet symbolizes him with the image of a shapeshifter, someone who is not really the father nor could possibly be,

because a father would never harm his own daughter. Even the shapeshifter is not totally to blame, because the moon plays a part in his terrible behavior. This kind of inability to name and blame the perpetrator is very common in abuse. The poem captures it with imagery, artfully, painfully. To compare the abuser to a shapeshifter demonstrates how hard it is for a child to fully comprehend that one's father could hurt a child.

From *quilting* (1991), "quilting"

From quilting (1991), "quilting" Summary

This poem compares the magic of a mother teaching her daughter to quilt to the magic that alchemists were seeking ages ago. In the first stanza, the mother and the daughter sit together in an "unknown" world. The mother is shown to be otherworldly because she has yellow eyes. In the second stanza, the alchemists, somewhere else, make their experiments that eventually become science, then stone.

The third verse shows the woman threading her needle, smiling at her daughter, and teaching her how the quilts will keep them warm. The final verse asks some questions about how the poem will end. Will the quilting continue for generations? Will the alchemists continue on with their endless work? Will the two worlds continue to leave other, having so little in common?

From quilting (1991), "quilting" Analysis

This poem compares two generational processes. The first is the commonplace, warm, loving exchange between a mother and a daughter. The mother is quilting with her daughter, teaching her the value of this time-consuming, gentle home art. The mother teaches by example and a few well-chosen words. The mother does not belong to this world, perhaps some planet far away, which the poet calls "unknown." The mother might be an alien because her eyes are yellow. In another place, somewhere but not known, alchemists, who for generations wish to change one element to another, are mumbling over their concoctions, trying to make magic. Their processes become ensconced into scientific theory, eventually immovable as symbolized by the word "stone."

The questions at the end of the poem examine the process of learning and changing over generations. Perhaps the woman's grandchildren and great-grandchildren will learn to quilt. The alchemists who "practice their tables" do not change, but rather solidify or "freeze" their concepts. The poem suggests that the two kinds of activities, quilting, or making cherished, useful items in homes, together as families, and alchemy, or struggling to transform one element to another, are so different from each other that they "spin away from each other forever.

From *quilting* (1991), "white lady"

From quilting (1991), "white lady" Summary

The subtitle of this poem says that "white lady" is a street name for cocaine. The poem personifies cocaine as a white lady who lures the family's young people into bondage. The white lady promises the young people, including the son, friend's daughter, and the poet's niece, the false vows of a prostitute, including true love and true understanding. Stanza three points out that in reality all these promises lead to imprisonment and prostitution for the young. The poet asks what the adults need to pay to get their children back, what they must owe to have their own back.

From quilting (1991), "white lady" Analysis

This poem addresses a personification of cocaine, called "white lady," which is a street name for coke. The first stanza talks about her, explaining that the white lady wants the children in her family. Once she has them, she holds onto them tight "and close as slavery," referring to earlier days when slaveholders held so unyielding to their slaves. The poet uses apostrophe to address the personification of cocaine, wanting to buy back the children as slaves were sometimes bought free. The second stanza speaks in the voice of the white lady, who seduces the young like a prostitute would, offering understanding, pleasure, and love. Stanza three apostrophizes the white lady, telling her that she has chained the sons of her people in the "basement/of the big house," another reference to slavery. She has turned the daughters "out into the streets," making them sell their bodies to maintain their habit. The poet asks the white lady what is needed for payment to reclaim the children, what they owe, somehow, to "own our own at last." There is no answer because the drug is an unyielding slaveholder.

From *quilting* (1991), "the birth of language"

From quilting (1991), "the birth of language" Summary

Another of Clifton's poems based on imagining Bible scenes, this poem hypothesizes that Adam had no language when he began in this world. When he woke up, he was afraid because he could not speak. He picks a blade of grass and puts it in his mouth, but he has no tongue and no language, a nice pun. The poet asks if the blade of grass drew blood in Adam's mouth, if the shock of the cut made him "lunge/toward language," if the surprise brought him to life and made him whisper the name of his wife, "eve."

From quilting (1991), "the birth of language" Analysis

This poem is another that imagines what it was like for Bible characters in their experiences. In this one, Adam comes to life. He is not completely formed at the outset of the poem. He lacks a tongue, both literally and symbolically. He is full of fear because he is alone and unformed. He picks a blade of grass and puts it in his mouth, which cuts him and makes him bleed, perhaps, although he can taste the grass even though he has no tongue. When he bleeds, he struggles to articulate his pain, which may have astonished him. The poem ends in a sequence of questions, not articulating his feelings but instead asking about them: did the blade of grass draw blood? Did it make him try to speak? Did he come to life with language and did his first word become that of his wife, Eve?

From *quilting* (1991), "sleeping beauty"

From quilting (1991), "sleeping beauty" Summary

This poem is similar to its predecessor from the point of view of the fairytale character, Sleeping Beauty. She has been sleeping and wakes up with the kiss of the prince. His mouth turns hers red and then very hot, similar to almost-spent coal left in a grate. She knows so many things from when she was awake, and she must unlearn them all. When she opens her eyes, she resents the fact that she is awake and she blames the prince for it.

From quilting (1991), "sleeping beauty" Analysis

This poem makes mild fun of the standard interpretation of Sleeping Beauty. The usual interpretation makes it seem that Sleeping Beauty is so happy to be awakened after her long absence and is delighted to jump on the horse behind Prince Charming and ride away. However, in this poem, Sleeping Beauty is not happy to be awakened. She knows she has to unlearn most of what she knows because she has slept so long. The kiss that wakens her receives a long simile, showing her mouth more red than normal, as red and hot as "coals/smothered and forgotten/in the grate." When Sleeping Beauty awakens, she is not happy to be awake. She sees Prince Charming and blames him for her situation. This has a larger symbolic meaning because angry women often blame men categorically in the same way, even though the men attempt to do the right things.

From *quilting* (1991), "poem in praise of menstruation"

From quilting (1991), "poem in praise of menstruation" Summary

This poem has been considered a signature piece by Lucille Clifton, identifying her as a feminist poet, although her topics range far beyond typical feminist topics. The first stanza compares the flow of the blood to the flow of a beautiful river, and the color of the blood to the "blood-red edge of the moon." The second stanza refers to the faithful recurrence of the period. The third stanza points out the courage of women receiving their periods, which cause pain and also passion. The fourth stanza points out that menstruation is ancient thing, back to the mother of cain and abel, eve. The final and fifth stanza points out that menstruation is probably the most powerful flow in the world, asking if there could be a river that powerful and strong, and if there is, that the reader should pray that it flows through everyone, animals that are "beautiful and faithful and ancient/and female and brave."

From quilting (1991), "poem in praise of menstruation" Analysis

Clifton has been characterized for this poem as being a feminist poet. This is a wonderful piece, but it by no means represents the wide and powerful subjects Clifton also addresses. Still, it is an empowering representation of menstruation, a topic that often troubles women and girls. Clifton characterizes menstruation as being a beautiful river. She links it to the moon, like which it appears every month, sometimes red as menstruation is. Menstruation is predictable; one can count on it, like the disappearing and reappearing of the moon. It is a river of passion and also of pain; it is ancient, the wellspring of both good and evil in this world, as Eve was in the Bible. Finally, again characterizing menstruation as a great river, Clifton asks if there is any such river in the world so powerful, and continues to refer to all the other powerful adjectives in the previous stanzas.

From *quilting* (1991), "peeping tom"

From quilting (1991), "peeping tom" Summary

This poem addresses a man's natural inclination for homosexuality, or at least transgendering. When he was a little boy, the man looked through a window to see a man dress himself as a woman in "our room," inferring that the transformation happened in the poet's home. This was powerful for him. It spoke to his central desire. Now that he is a man, he remembers that image and it is so compelling that he does not desire his "natural wife," but rather that experience of a man becoming another being, a woman.

From quilting (1991), "peeping tom" Analysis

This poem addresses, with poignant, almost unbearably powerful imagery, a man's inclination that goes outside the usual man/woman relationship. The man has always wished to be a woman, and one day as a youth he watched another man indulge that desire by dressing, "turning," himself into a woman. Although this man is married, he cannot yearn for his wife. Instead, he takes himself back to that youthful experience, so powerful, looking into a window, presumably the poet's window, because she uses the word "our," seeing a man become a woman. He is turned away from his wife, and keeps looking for the long-ago image of himself with wide eyes, wearing a "plaid cap," which places him in history in the thirties.

From *quilting* (1991), "wild blessings"

From quilting (1991), "wild blessings" Summary

This is a poem about understanding. One day, a woman licks the poet's palm of her hand. The experience brings to mind all the "hand" experiences that the poet has had, holding the hands of many people and thus understanding them. She has held the hand of child abusers, suicides, junkie priests, soldiers who destroyed their lives by killing innocent people, including women that seemed just like their mothers, and many more. The person that licks the poet's hand brings to mind all these things, and although the poet is grateful for many of her blessings, she feels not necessarily grateful for her deep understanding of the terrible things she has understood about others.

From quilting (1991), "wild blessings" Analysis

This poem infers the poet's ability to deeply intuit others' experiences. Holding people's hands, and by inference talking to them, has given her powerful understanding of horrific things, including a man who has repeatedly raped his daughter, and a girl, perhaps the abused girl, who attempted suicide by throwing herself out of a "tenement window." She has held the hand of a priest who is an addict, and of a Viet Nam veteran who killed beyond his understanding, even killing a woman so much like his mother. She is not particularly happy that people have given her this deep, intuitive understanding of their profound griefs, just as she is not particularly happy that a woman has, uninvited, licked her hand. Perhaps the poet's inherent gratitude has made it possible for her to understand so deeply, and although she is grateful, she is not happy to know the deep horrors that she knows.

From *quilting* (1991), "photograph"

From quilting (1991), "photograph" Summary

This poem is about viewing the poet's grandchildren in a black and white photo, where they are spinning and playing. The poet requests in a prayer that the universe keep them turning in beauty because trouble also spins around in the world.

From quilting (1991), "photograph" Analysis

This poem is an image, a vignette, of a black and white photo of children playing the universal game of spinning around and around. The poet compares their spinning to the troubles that turn around and around in the world, and addresses the universe in a prayer that the children keep playing the childish game instead of spinning into trouble.

From *quilting* (1991), "lot's wife 1988"

From quilting (1991), "lot's wife 1988" Summary

This poem compares the poet's childhood homes and memories to Lot's wife turning back to look at her own homes and memories. The poet's father thought that each home would be permanent, but the family moved. Clifton remembers not so much the homes as the weeds. She stares at the weeds as a child, so much that she can remember each of them as a day. She also stares at the mirror to see if she is really there, both as a child and now in the present as an adult.

From quilting (1991), "lot's wife 1988" Analysis

This poem uses the symbol of weeds to pinpoint places where her family lived as she was growing up. Her father hoped that the home he bought at 11 Harwood Place would be the permanent place of the family, but he lost that place and many others. The child Clifton was recalls the weeds as she stood on porches looking out of the houses. She goes back into a house, perhaps in memory, checking the mirror, which can be a symbol of the revealing of soul or internal reality as well as a physical mirror, to see if she really exists. Like many others of Clifton's poems, this poem gives a positive spin to an otherwise vilified Bible character, Lot's wife, who was turned into salt when she turned back to look at the home she was leaving. Clifton spins off the reference to salt, which is a basic to all animal life, and promises that she will write poems, a promise that will be even "surer than salt."

From *quilting* (1991), "poem to my uterus"

From quilting (1991), "poem to my uterus" Summary

This poem is an extended metaphor of the uterus as a sock, a dark sack full of desire, where the poet "slippered" her children, both those who survived and those who died. The poem is written just after a hysterectomy, when the poet has had the uterus removed. The poet knows that the uterus has served her well. Using apostrophe, she addresses the uterus with affection and gratitude for the many years of sexuality and childbearing the uterus has served her. The poet feels that in many ways, she doesn't know how to go forward with her life without her uterus.

From quilting (1991), "poem to my uterus" Analysis

This is one of the famous Clifton poems that deals directly, almost brutally, with female matters. Most people don't want to think about a uterus, either theirs or someone else's, but Clifton apostrophizes her own uterus affectionately. She acknowledges the great service that her uterus has given her, giving her children, even bearing with the trauma of babies who died in utero. The extended image or symbol of the sock is interesting because it only vaguely reveals the actual shape of a uterus, but gives the strong experience of things going in and out of it. When the poet has her hysterectomy, she loses her sock and therefore will be barefoot, an interesting set of symbols and images for the experience.

From *quilting* (1991), "to my last period"

From quilting (1991), "to my last period" Summary

This poem directly addresses the poet's last menstrual period. She calls the period, "old girl," and mentions that they've been together for thirty-eight years. She points out that the period always arrives "splendid in your red dress" but always brings trouble for the poet at the same time. In the second stanza, the poet creates an extended simile, comparing the leaving of menstruation to a discussion among elderly women who have hated a hussy within their midst, but once she is gone, they reminisce about how lovely she was. This means that even though the menstrual period was always difficult, it was also beautiful because it shaped the poet's life.

From quilting (1991), "to my last period" Analysis

This is one of Clifton's signature poems about the functions of the female body. Women experience a great change during menopause but hardly anyone discusses it openly in the public forum. In this poem, the poet accepts both the discomforts and troubles of menstruation right along with the blessings of it. Having the menstrual period is compared to having a "hussy" among the family. Everyone castigates her and despises her, but once she's gone, they remember her beauty with fondness. They sigh for her, the grandmothers who once hated her. This poem gives a sense of both sides of having a period, perhaps encouraging women who dislike their bodies to regard them with more kindness and tenderness.

From *quilting* (1991), "wishes for sons"

From quilting (1991), "wishes for sons" Summary

In this poem, Clifton expresses what perhaps most women and girls have thought, that men should have to experience the frustration and pain that goes along with menstruation. She wants men to know what it's like to have cramps, to be in a strange town without tampons and with no store in sight to buy some. She wants them to know what it's like to have your period come early and be wearing a white skirt. She wants them to know the fear of having the period be a week late. Then in stanza three, she wishes for men to know what menopausal symptoms are like, including hot flashes, coming just when you meet someone special, and terrible huge clots that come without warning or pattern. She wishes that men, who are often arrogant, could be brought to some humility by having to deal with their womanly symptoms with equally arrogant gynecologists.

From quilting (1991), "wishes for sons" Analysis

Women may smile at the poet's expression of the universal feminine wish, that just for once men and boys could know what it's like to be at the mercy of the female cycle. The image of starting your period in a strange town where you can't get tampons or pads is a terrible and wonderful thing to wish on a "son." The poem uses spare language to indicate the feeling of being at the mercy of your body when your period comes early or even worse, late. Rarely mentioned but very apparent to women who go through menopause are the hot flashes and the blood clots. The poet wishes these on "sons" as well, so they will know. The last stanza refers to the cavalier way many men deal with women who are struggling with these womanly realities. It indicates that if men really could experience these things they would be more understanding and helpful instead of arrogant.

From *quilting* (1991), "How art though fallen From Heaven/O Lucifer, son of the Morning?..."

From quilting (1991), "How art though fallen From Heaven/O Lucifer, son of the Morning?..." Summary

This poem doesn't have a typical title. Instead, it is a quotation from scripture, from the Book of Isaiah. This poem introduces several poems on the topic of Lucifer, or Satan, or the devil, who is hated and despised by most religionists. However, Clifton explores the nature of Lucifer as well as the whole reason and experience of his falling from heaven. In this poem, the first stanza shows everyone missing Lucifer after he's first fallen. The name Lucifer means light-bringer, and the first stanza shows heaven is dark without him. The cherubim are singing Kaddish, which is the Jewish ceremony of mourning. The second stanza shows "the solitary brother," who is Christ, pointing toward the garden of Eden. In the third stanza, there is light in the garden of Eden even though no one is prepared for it, and humanity is born. The last lines "oh lucifer/what have you done" allude to Lucifer's causing the changes somehow in the Garden of Eden.

From quilting (1991), "How art though fallen From Heaven/O Lucifer, son of the Morning?..." Analysis

This poem, among the other Lucifer poems, explores some aspects of Heaven, of Jesus Christ, of Lucifer and all their relationships. The poem alludes to the verses in the Bible that suggest that Lucifer was a chosen and beloved son until he fell. The cherubim, or a type of angels, are holding the Jewish ceremony of mourning, called Kaddish. The other chosen son, Jesus Christ, points toward the earth, toward the Garden of Eden, evidently not long formed. Everything is changing in the garden evidently because of Lucifer, or something that he has done. The lightbringer brought some kind of light to the garden. "...animals rise up to walk" seems to suggest some stage of evolution that is cut short, so that humans become human before anyone expects it. It is a charming view of Lucifer's place in the heavenly order.

From *quilting* (1991), "remembering the birth of lucifer"

From quilting (1991), "remembering the birth of lucifer" Summary

In the first stanza of this poem, Lucifer is born when a flash of light breaks from God's little finger. This birth caused light and shimmering everywhere. The second stanza reflects on that light, noting that everyone knew that much light could not remain in "one small heaven." It was too much. The seraphim, another order of angels, rustled "their three wings," a delightful extrapolation of what these angels might look like, and began watching to see what could possibly emerge from this event.

From quilting (1991), "remembering the birth of lucifer" Analysis

This is a reminiscing poem, noting that Lucifer was born from the actual body of God, breaking forth from his littlest finger. This infers or symbolizes that Lucifer was born with the potential to be highly good, being a son of God directly. However, the power and light that he brings is too much "for one small heaven," and everyone is holding its breath (angels having no gender) to see what will come from this high birth. They are watching. This poem foreshadows the great events that follow, when Lucifer falls from heaven.

From *quilting* (1991), "whispered to lucifer"

From quilting (1991), "whispered to lucifer" Summary

As Lucifer falls from heaven, those left behind "whisper" some messages to him, some questions, trying somehow to understand how he fell. He is called "six-finger," based evidently on the biblical reference to giants in the land who had six fingers on each hand and six toes on each foot. The speaker/s in the poem ask Lucifer what makes him leave. They wonder if it was the woman who enticed him, since he wanted to lie near her, to caress her, to love her. They say that he fell "laughing," his "grace all ashard." He has left everyone in darkness, in evening, still doing God's business, but without the confidence they once had.

From quilting (1991), "whispered to lucifer" Analysis

This poem follows the former poem in analyzing Lucifer's fall from heaven. Those left behind, either one or more speakers, wonder where he has gone and why he left them. It links Lucifer with the biblical "giants in the earth," perhaps indicating that he is the father to them. Indeed, the poem continues to infer that since Lucifer left possibly in attraction to the beautiful Eve, hoping perhaps to unite with her physically, this echoes the other references in Clifton's poems to sexuality changing the history of the Garden of Eden and thus the world. Lucifer's light shatters into shards as he falls, and the light goes with him, leaving Heaven darkened. Everyone still obeys their father, God, but they have lost their confidence. This alludes to the other Bible-based poems that indicate that Adam and Eve's fall in the garden, including sexuality, take them out of the realm of the human into the realm of godliness, because they can create.

From *quilting* (1991), "eve's version"

From quilting (1991), "eve's version" Summary

This poem follows the previous one, where Lucifer was perhaps tempted by Eve's sensuality, wishing to couple with her. Yes, this is what happens, the poem says, speaking Eve's thoughts. Lucifer slips into her dreams and whispers to her, increasing her sensuality, filling her mind with images of an apple, which echoes the shape of her breast. Lucifer fills Eve with longing for herself, similar to his longing for her, the apple being a symbol of the luscious, full breast of Eve.

From quilting (1991), "eve's version" Analysis

This poem is a charming extended conceit, the image or symbol of the apple transmuted in Eve's dreams to being her breast, so beautiful that Lucifer creates great longing in Eve to have it for herself. When she sees the apple, she is filled with a more-than-hunger longing to experience the sexuality of that breast.

From *quilting* (1991), "lucifer understanding at last"

From quilting (1991), "lucifer understanding at last" Summary

This poem says directly what the previous poems have been hinting, that Lucifer was enchanted and entranced by sexuality and thus fell to earth, leaving heaven, leaving all the promise that a chosen son could have hoped for. Lucifer understands that God's father is in creativity and more than that, he is "bearer of lightning/and of lust," feeling the power of attraction in light and in sex. He falls like lighting, falling like a phallus thrust into the earth. He finds what he wants in Eden, and says that if the angels come to understand this attraction, there will never be any more peace in heaven.

From quilting (1991), "lucifer understanding at last" Analysis

This is a strong, sexual poem. Lucifer is personified as a lightning bolt, a phallus that thrusts itself into the garden and experiences the fierce pulses of sexuality. This is enough to let him know what sex is like and he's sure that he has made the right choice in leaving heaven for earthly delights. Indeed, he thinks that if the angels find out the power and delight of this sexual experience, they will be stirred up and never at peace again.

From *quilting* (1991), "the garden of delight"

From quilting (1991), "the garden of delight" Summary

This poem suggests that earth experience in the "garden of delight," which is partly Eden and partly the earthly experience generally, may be of the four elements. It may be stone, which in this poem is an image of a bare buttock. It may be water, washing strongly into open mouths. Fire or air are the other choices. Some experience earth as a collection of syllables that, taken together, make up an ineffable something that they long for and search all their lives for. Finally, some people know earth experience as a test.

From quilting (1991), "the garden of delight" Analysis

This is a simple collection of images, first of all of the four elements that attract certain souls to this earth experience, symbolized by the Garden of Eden. The last two stanzas indicate that some people feel a longing and attraction for some ineffable thing that pulls them through life. However, the last short three lines indicate that earth life is, for some, simply a test.

From *quilting* (1991), "adam thinking"

From quilting (1991), "adam thinking" Summary

This short poem speaks of Adam's longing for Eve. He explains his intense desire for her because she is taken from his body in the form of a rib. He wants to tunnel back into her, a symbol for the strong sexual desire that men have. He does not even know his name yet, and struggles to "roar" it, but he cannot. He feels these desires so fiercely that he says he would rather not have been created as the first man, but rather simply born.

From quilting (1991), "adam thinking" Analysis

This is an interesting exploration of the fierce male sexual drive. It originates with Adam who has lost some of his bone and hungers to "tunnel back" to get connected again. He can hardly stand the feelings he has in this longing. It is so "fierce" that he would rather discard his standing as the first man and just be born to be rid of it. Of course, the irony is that all his sons afterward retain the same longing.

From *quilting* (1991), "eve thinking"

From quilting (1991), "eve thinking" Summary

Eve has consciousness before Adam. She looks around at all the creatures "coupling/claw and wing," seeing the expression of sexuality that has determined the creation of this world, apart from God's creation, according to the mythology set up by this sequence of poems, or so the creatures seem to think, including Lucifer. Eve knows that Adam is the one she will couple with, but at the moment, he is just a "clay two-foot" striving for consciousness, unable to even say or know his own name. She determines to waken him by whispering into his mouth their two names, inferring a sexual kiss.

From quilting (1991), "eve thinking" Analysis

This poem foreshadows Eve's taking the apple, bringing sexuality and coupling into the world. She sees Eden coupling madly, "claw and wing/groping one another," but she cannot do so because Adam is still asleep, not even alike, though struggling to come awake. She determines that she will initiate his waking by whispering their two names into his mouth during sleep, kissing him deeply, thus initiating human sexuality into the garden.

From *quilting* (1991), "the story thus far"

From quilting (1991), "the story thus far" Summary

This poem continues the conceit that Lucifer was attracted to Eve and thus fell, and Adam was attracted too, although at this point he is simply clay. The two males follow Eve out of heaven, following her "bright back" out of heaven, past the angels, into the new world of the garden of Eden. Eve's presence banishes chaos and makes the world light, glorious, even makes Eden what it is.

From quilting (1991), "the story thus far" Analysis

This is a beautiful conceit, that Lucifer himself does not fall from Heaven but is tempted away by Eve. Because the Bible story indicates that Eve is tempted by Lucifer, it is a splendid turnabout, that Eve has lured Lucifer out of his honorable place in Heaven. Both Lucifer and Adam follow Eve out of Heaven, to the garden, which heretofore has been simply "chaos," but by Eve's entrance has become glorious and full of light. Lucifer and Adam thus await her attentions, though she is only aware of Adam at the moment.

From *quilting* (1991), "lucifer speaks in his own voice"

From quilting (1991), "lucifer speaks in his own voice" Summary

Lucifer acknowledges that he is a seraphim. He knows it and owns it. He also knows that if he abandons this, he will enjoy sexuality. He is very sure of it. He sees that everything on the earth moves in some way, and so he takes for himself the body and the movement of the serpent. He does this to illuminate things for Adam and Eve, knowing that he has the power to do it, so he does.

From quilting (1991), "lucifer speaks in his own voice" Analysis

This poem is interesting because Lucifer makes several strong assumptions, some of which have turned out to be true but some which are very wrong. He knows he is a seraphim, an angel with "folding wing," and he is sure that if he joins the earth creation, he will enjoy sweetly sexual nights. He sees his chance by taking over the body of the serpent, so he crawls along among all the other movement on the earth. He thinks that he is the only one that can bring light to Adam and Eve. Are these things true? No one can tell from this poem, but it is certain as the Bible story plays out that he does not enjoy the sexuality he is so certain of.

From *quilting* (1991), "blessing the boats"

From quilting (1991), "blessing the boats" Summary

The subtitle of this poem references the college that Clifton has taught at, St. Mary's. It seems to be a poem blessing the graduates who are leaving the college. This poem symbolizes understanding as a tide that can carry the new graduates into their new lives, without fear. The graduates are enjoined to "kiss the wind," and then turn from it so it will blow them forward on their backs. The poem symbolizes water as something that will carry the graduating students forward in all the things that will come to them in their lives.

From quilting (1991), "blessing the boats" Analysis

This poem echoes the famous, beautiful poem "May the Road Reach out to Meet You." It is a poem of blessing for students who are graduating and entering their lives. It is an extended metaphor of water and wind, moving graduating students forward. The tide is a symbol of the students; understanding, the things that they learned in college, moving them forward and increasing as they go. The wind that sails boats receives the students' kiss and then "loves your back," moving the students forward through life. The water keeps moving and will keep moving the students forward, and the poet hopes that the students will forever retain their innocence in the journey.

From *the book of light* (1993), "imagining bear"

From the book of light (1993), "imagining bear" Summary

This poem is dedicated to the poet's grandfather, "Alonzo Moore Sr," which is the subtitle. The poem is written in unrhymed, lumbering couplets, the sounds of the language echoing the bear-like nature of the grandfather. Each couplet starts with "imagine him," asking the reader to imagine the grandfather in various ways. The first couplet imagines the grandfather too wide and too wide to enter parlors. The second couplet imagines the grandfather with a grizzly "hide," hairy even to his own eye. The third couplet imagines him with a smell like bark, "rank and bittersweet." The fourth couplet sees the man lumbering and growling. The fifth breaks the pattern by asking to give the grandfather an old guitar and "a bottle of booze." The sixth imagines the family's response to the grandfather, as the children laugh and the wife just sighs. The last stanza links him to the present, as the poet remembers him singing and has him imagine his granddaughter eulogizing him in a poem.

From the book of light (1993), "imagining bear" Analysis

This is an extended metaphor of the poet's grandfather as a bear. The images, while not insulting, are also not exactly flattering. The grandfather lumbers like a bear, smells wild like a tree out of doors, has a grizzly, hairy skin like a bear, sings as if he were growling. The children are delighted but the wife merely patient and bemused. In this poem, the poet remembers him and honors his bearness, his bearlike qualities. She imagines him reading and understanding the poet's remembrance of his qualities. It is a sweet and unflinching portrait of a man who is so masculine he is bearlike.

From *the book of light* (1993), "the women you are accustomed to"

From the book of light (1993), "the women you are accustomed to" Summary

This is another dream poem, where societally correct women appear and talk about fancy things, like "the names/of avenues in France." These women wear the little black dress and have perfectly set, streaked hair. They have tight asses and tight lips. Their conversation is so predictable. The poet doesn't want to see them in this dream. She asks them "what the hell." They shake their heads, which are now marble, symbolizing lifelessness and coldness, and they walk "erect" out of the dream to a place where everything is so predictable. The poet relaxes in images of a person who is totally different, with "burning blood" and a "dancing tongue," someone alive and passionate.

From the book of light (1993), "the women you are accustomed to" Analysis

This is one of Clifton's scathing commentaries, looking with distaste at the women whom society idealizes. They are "perfect in every way," to quote Mary Poppins, but they are cold. In fact, they are dead because they are eventually marble in the poem. Clifton doesn't feel sad to see them go. She has been intruded upon in her dream and instead settles into remembering a person she loves who is hot and passionate.

From *the book of light* (1993), "song at midnight"

From the book of light (1993), "song at midnight" Summary

This poem honors a woman who has grown old but is still sweet and delightful, who "carries much sweetness/in the folds of her flesh." It is a sexual poem about a woman past the usual time that men find women attractive. Clifton reminds men, "brothers," that she is still so much worth loving not only for her sweetness but because she is faithful, albeit having grown round in her aging. Clifton enjoins the men to love her because she deserves it, and if they don't love her, perhaps no one will.

From the book of light (1993), "song at midnight" Analysis

The subtitle, "... do not/send me out/among strangers," foreshadows the ending, enjoining the brothers, or men, to still love a woman who is growing old but is still so sweet,and so deserving of love because she is faithful. This poem goes against society's standard interpretation of attractiveness thought only to be found in young women. It reminds us that old women too crave to be loved.

This poem is apostrophized to "brothers," in other words, to men who are in the brotherhood of humanity, those who can feel and understand the needs and emotions of an older woman who still needs to be loved even though her body has become old and unattractive according to society's standards. The "folds of her flesh" has the potential to be a directly sexual image, since the poet enjoins the men to enjoy the sweetness still there. An extended comparison, a simile, of the woman to the moon, rounder and more faithful, gives the image of a menopausal, larger woman. Finally, the last questions tear at the heart, asking who will love and hold this woman, who still has the needs and feelings of any woman, even though she is older, if the brothers won't do so.

From *the book of light* (1993), "here yet be dragons"

From the book of light (1993), "here yet be dragons" Summary

This poem addresses the terror that haunts most writers and artists. The dragon is a symbol of writer's block or artist's block, including the disaster of losing a whole language because someone cannot write the poems. The first stanza refers to that disaster. The second stanza, just two lines, says there are monsters in the dragon's mouth, which eat up lost people and the poems they did not write. Poems help us imagine ourselves, say the next two stanzas. The last two lines point out that the fragile nature of this art-making keeps writers and artists humble.

From the book of light (1993), "here yet be dragons" Analysis

What writer has not experienced dry periods or times of not producing? This poem points out with an extended metaphor the terrible losses we suffer with not writing. The dragon's mouth is at the "edge of the world," and it is full of sharp teeth that chop up people and their poems that do not get written. Knowing this, the poet poses a question, asking if anyone who creates can become puffed up or proud because losing one's voice or poems is such a fragile thing.

From *the book of light* (1993), "the yeti poet returns to his village to tell his story"

From the book of light (1993), "the yeti poet returns to his village to tell his story" Summary

This poem speaks from the point of view of a yeti, an abominable snowman. He has left his homeland to enter a world full of people who live in a "shrunken" world and have no hair on their bodies that he can see. He cannot understand how they sleep closed in "pouches" and he detests the thin breasts of the women, calling them paps. He does not want his picture taken by a "sprit-catching box" nor does he want to be hurt by a long stick that makes a big boom. He returns to his homeland, where everyone understands everything about themselves.

From the book of light (1993), "the yeti poet returns to his village to tell his story" Analysis

This is a charming journey into the mind of an imaginary creature, a yeti, an abominable snowman. In this poem, the yeti has left his home and gone wandering, running into people he cannot understand. They look wrong, especially the women who have paltry breasts. They live wrong, sleeping enclosed and carrying a box that can capture one's spirit, and a long stick that can kill you. The yeti has seen enough that he wants to go home where he and everyone else understands what, where, and who they are. Since no one has documented seeing a real yeti, this is a delightful glimpse into the mind of someone who maybe is and maybe isn't real.

From *the book of light* (1993), "crabbing (the poet crab speaks)"

From the book of light (1993), "crabbing (the poet crab speaks)" Summary

This is a short and spare poem, speaking from the point of view of a crab who is a poet. This crab sees the fishermen crabbers capturing his relatives in crab pots, smiling as they do so. The metaphor of the crab as being sweet and sacred relates to the poet's nature of sweetness and sacredness. The last three lines point out that just as the crab cannot know how sweet its meat is, nor the meat of others, the poet doesn't really know how sweet and sacred his/her work is.

From the book of light (1993), "crabbing (the poet crab speaks)" Analysis

This is one of Clifton's more obscure poems, exploring the nature of writing poetry. The crab in the poem knows that his relatives are being captured by people who think they are superior to the crabs. However, the crab poet knows that these people cannot understand the nature of crabs, just as poets and people generally may not understand the sweet, sacred "meat" of poems.

From *the book of light* (1993), "the earth is a living thing"

From the book of light (1993), "the earth is a living thing" Summary

This poem is a delicious gathering of images of black things. The general topic is things in the earth. The title begins the poem and the first verse continues with the verb "is," continuing to catalog beautiful earthly black things. The first stanza calls the earth a black bear so huge that as it shambles it can toss "mountains into the sea." The second stanza calls the earth a black hawk that flies circles around a burial ground full of cleaned and thrown-away bones. The third stanza, two short lines, calls the earth a black fish so deep in the water it is blind, and also calls it a diamond buried in coal. The final stanza is an extended metaphor of the earth as a live, beautiful child "of the universe" who brushes her black, kinky hair clean with her hand.

From the book of light (1993), "the earth is a living thing" Analysis

This poem explores the positive nature of black things in nature, alluding to the need of black people to be able to feel beautiful, clean, and connected to things in the universe and in the natural world. The black bear, hawk, fish, and then the diamond that is buried in black refer to powerful, beautiful things related to blackness. The final verse gives a direct image of a black child with kinky hair who uses her hand to brush her own hair clean, presumably of the aspersions of uncleanness that society has ascribed to blackness.

From *the book of light* (1993), "if i should"

From the book of light (1993), "if i should" Summary

The subtitle of this poem is dedicated "to clark kent." It refers to the helplessness the abused child that Clifton has been long ago, pointing out that there really is no help for that child. She enjoins Clark Kent to enter the darkest room in her house, which may symbolize the poet's mind as well. If she goes there and speaks in her own voice, she will see a variety of images, including terrible furniture, the covers of which cover "dusty bodies," which may be literal or symbolic. She will see an oversexed father, a husband holding ice in his hand, a mother with internal bleeding, presumably from injuries, and a "small, imploding girl," who is Clifton as a child. Clifton asks simply who can possibly rescue her from such a circumstance, Clark Kent?

From the book of light (1993), "if i should" Analysis

Being trapped in an abusive home, a child has no recourse. This poem asks Clark Kent if he will be the one to rescue the poet from abuse, dirt, poverty, and suffering not only of herself but her mother as well. Apostrophizing Clark Kent instead of the powerful Superman alludes to the fact that no one at all can rescue this child. The images are not always clear in meaning. For example, what does it mean that a husband clutches ice in his hand "like a blessing"? This must be a personal reference with meaning mostly to the poet. However, the other dismal images bring to mind the despair and hopelessness of a child trapped in abuse, with no one, certainly not Clark Kent, to help.

From *the book of light* (1993), "further note to clark"

From the book of light (1993), "further note to clark" Summary

The subtitle says, "do you know how hard this is for me?/do you know what you're asking?" The short verse is an extended metaphor of the poet as water pouring fast and hard like Niagara Falls. This water is clinging to the edge and is struggling not to go over the edge. It accuses Clark Kent of never doing anything but staying safe.

From the book of light (1993), "further note to clark" Analysis

As a companion poem to the former poem, this verse gives a strong, powerful image of water that does not want to tumble over the edge in a torrent as crazily powerful as Niagara Falls. She has not tumbled but she has had no help. Clark Kent, for all his potential, never helps her, either, more concerned for his own safety. This poem gives the sense of how devastating abuse is to the at-risk child. She is holding on with all she has, even though the power of Niagara Falls is pulling her over the edge. For those who have been abused, this poem will speak powerfully of how frightening and compelling the dark forces of abuse can be.

From *the book of light* (1993), "final note to clark"

From the book of light (1993), "final note to clark" Summary

This is a third and companion piece to the preceding two poems. In it, the poet acknowledges the misplaced hope that abused children often place in fairy tales and comic book heroes. The poem says that the comic books were mistaken about Clark Kent who was only himself and not really Superman after all. The poem apostrophizes Clark Kent, asking how she could have thought that he could have helped her. All the time that she was taking risks, finding her truth in poems, even "pointing out the bad guys," she believed that Clark Kent would turn into Superman, whose enhanced vision could see her beauty. She berates herself a little because she wonders what she could have been thinking, hoping these things. She is only herself, not wonder woman, and Clark Kent is just himself, not Superman.

From the book of light (1993), "final note to clark" Analysis

This is a poem of despair and perhaps a little hope from the point of view of a person healing from abuse. During her childhood, the abused girl held out hope against hope that Clark Kent would transform and rescue her and even see how beautiful she is. However, the poem acknowledges that it was so foolish to even hope for such a thing. She is only who she is, Clifton, and Clark Kent is not really Superman, just a meek and powerless Kent. These are hard realizations but at the same time, the poet has survived the abuse and can face even her disappointed hopes.

From *the book of light* (1993), "note, passed to superman"

From the book of light (1993), "note, passed to superman" Summary

This is a fourth and companion piece to the Clark Kent poems, indicating the growth and triumph of the abused child. The poet says that if she has seen Superman in costume, she will have recognized him right away. Clark Kent can hang out and talk and listen to Stories but not Superman who needs to save the city, with every bad guy potentially dangerous with killing poison, kryptonite. The poet recognizes all the trappings of Superman, the costume, the "whole ball of wax," because she has grown up on a "planet" as strange as Superman's home.

From the book of light (1993), "note, passed to superman" Analysis

In this poem, the poet compares in an extended metaphor the need for super-power to overcome an abusive home. The power it takes is as strong as that of Superman, whom the poet says she can recognize immediately because she has needed equivalent power to conquer. She intimately knows the accoutrements of the hero because she shares them. Indeed, the tone of the poem is companionable and comfortable, starting out with "sweet jesus, superman," and continues with a casual phrase, "the whole/ball of wax." In this poem the poet conquers, just as Superman does.

From *the book of light* (1993), "leda 1"

From the book of light (1993), "leda 1" Summary

This is the first of the Leda poems, this speaking from the point of view of Leda after she has been impregnated by Zeus in the form of a swan. In this poem, Leda feels anything but beautiful or honored after her experience. Her children have been taken away from her and her mother is gone. Her father lustfully follows her with "thick lips slavering." She lives shunned in her village and at night she dreams of the time she was taken by the god, dreams full of "the cursing of me/fucking god fucking me."

From the book of light (1993), "leda 1" Analysis

This first of the Leda poems explores Leda's feelings about her experience. Mythology sometimes makes it out that she was lucky to be chosen by Zeus, but Leda hardly feels that way in this poem. She sees her residence as "the backside" of her town, and she is always at risk at her father who is pursuing her sexually, her own father. At night, Leda cannot escape the experience of sex with a god, feeling that she also participating in the "fucking" even though she was assaulted. This is a poem of misery and guilt.

From *the book of light* (1993), "leda 2"

From the book of light (1993), "leda 2" Summary

The subtitle of this piece is "a note on visitations," referring to Zeus visiting and sexually attacking her. This poem connects Mary's visitation by God, who impregnates her with Jesus, to Leda's experience with Zeus as a swan. Although Mary's experience ostensibly goes well, Leda's does not. The poem notes that sometimes these types of visitations go badly, with the three wise men being dangerous, the animals rebelling in their stalls, the old husband jealous and suspicious, and the only "shining" thing is "the fur between her thighs."

From the book of light (1993), "leda 2" Analysis

Can this poem be thought to be blasphemous? Perhaps it can, since Leda's rape is compared to Mary's visitation, where Mary, who is betrothed but not married, is sexually taken by God to produce a god-son, just as Leda's rape results in children that are half-god, half-human. This poem also points up the difference between Zeus, who is feathered, leaving feathers all over the stable, and Leda, who is part animal, so that the hair between her legs becomes "fur between her thighs." Nothing is written about the impregnation of Mary, but this is an interesting comparison between the two mythical rapes.

From *the book of light* (1993), "leda 3"

From the book of light (1993), "leda 3" Summary

This poem is subtitled "a personal note (re: visitations)." It is spoken from the point of view of Leda, who was raped by Zeus in the guise of a swan. She recalls the images she sees during the rape, including "phalluses of light," snakes with phallus-like tongues that are thick, and "patriarchs of bird" who expose themselves while flying earthward. Leda has seen all these things but what she wants is someone to love her, since she is lonely, especially since no one will have her after having had children. She enjoins Zeus to come to her as a man, since he wants what men want.

From the book of light (1993), "leda 3" Analysis

This is another powerful poem from the point of view of a mythical character. Leda is lonely, so much so that her skin is "sick with loneliness." No one can love her now that she has had children with a god. Surely, she has seen things that no other woman has seen, including piercing, descending light, snakes that promise her love, perhaps referring to the snake-like neck of the swan, and the bird itself showing its penis as it descends through the air. Leda does not want all these "pyrotechnics," all this godly show. All she wants is the love a man and that is the one thing she cannot have. She apostrophizes Zeus, reminding him that he wants sex like other men, so he should visit her in that form.

From *the book of light* (1993), "far memory 1"

From the book of light (1993), "far memory 1" Summary

The subtitle of this poem is "a poem in seven parts," and each part has a number and another subtitle. This part 1 has a subtitle, "convent." It is a poem about an acolyte who becomes a nun, the inner story of her experience. This first poem begins with the image of areas of stone worn by knees, into which the new sister fits her own knees. She runs her hands over the brick wall, smelling it and feeling its texture, which is both powdery and wet. She can look up and see light coming through bars in a window. She hears the other nuns singing at "matins," or during morning worship. She universalizes the sound, making it the sound of all peace and the light of the candles becomes the light of creation to her. She refers to "the wonderful simplicity of prayer" and feels the smoothness of the prayer beads, ending the poem with a double entendre, that prayers are attended but also attended to.

From the book of light (1993), "far memory 1" Analysis

This poem is a fragment of time, a momentary experience of a woman entering a convent. She nestles her knees into holes in the stone floor worn over long time by the knees of other praying women. This establishes a very, very long history of the convent. The woman must fragment her experience in order to make sense of it. She focuses on a brick wall, feeling and smelling it, and the bars in a window high above. The convent appears to be prison-like as well as worshipful. The worship part speaks to the woman as she hears the other sisters singing and praying, and she feels the genuineness of this when she ends the poem by saying the prayers are "certainly attended," or in other words, that the praying sisters are aware and present during the service.

From *the book of light* (1993), "far memory 2"

From the book of light (1993), "far memory 2" Summary

The subtitle of this poem is "someone inside me remembers." This very short poem runs through the changes that the nun has gone through, shaving her head and hiding her legs so she will not be vain. She refers to her fingers as holy and her body as promised to something "more certain/than myself."

From the book of light (1993), "far memory 2" Analysis

This poem suggests the submission of the passions of the body (and soul) to become a holy nun. The woman in the poem has had her head shaved and all her body covered to prevent vanity and sin. She has turned her fingers, which can be vehicles of love, into "places of prayer." She refers to her whole body as a symbol of something dedicated to a higher purpose, her nunhood.

From *the book of light* (1993), "far memory 3"

From the book of light (1993), "far memory 3" Summary

This poem is simply subtitled "again." This poem looks back on the nun's life before she becomes a nun. She has been born during a war, on a day of "perpetual help." She refers to her birth to a mother who is silent during the birth process, and she feels she has come from a "house/of stillness" before her birth. She lives in a home with a "betraying father" and even is married to a husband, who eventually leaves her to take vows, so she does as well. However, she has had enough of love and passion to wrestle with it as she remembers her "secular days and nights/of another life."

From the book of light (1993), "far memory 3" Analysis

This nun enters the convent later in life, after having been married and having had hard experiences such as war and abuse from a father. The woman is born during a time of war and on a day that foreshadows her entry into a convent, referring to "perpetual help." This poem honestly refers to the struggle that a person taking vows will have with her body, with her passion. The nun calls this passion "old disobedient friend," because passion is part of life, but she feels she must overcome it.

From *the book of light* (1993), "far memory 4"

From the book of light (1993), "far memory 4" Summary

The poem is subtitled "trying to understanding this life." It is another short poem in three stanzas. The nun feels that no matter how she tries, she cannot find comfort. She wonders whom she has failed that she must wake up cold each morning. She links herself to some unknown moment in history when a sister walked away from children being pulled to harm in a cart. A woman appears constantly in her dreams, "dragging her old habit," a double entendre referring to a real habit and a nun's dress. This old habit may refer to the passion in the preceding poem. She instead turns to a day of "rescue, rescue," referring to the nun's life of service.

From the book of light (1993), "far memory 4" Analysis

In this poem, the nun is not really clear about how to accomplish the high aspirations of her calling. She tries and tries, but she still wakens cold and comfortless every day. She imagines that she is part of a long trail of nuns, women who have tried to serve but have not been good enough. She dreams of a woman in an old habit or with an old habit, a play on words, and she cannot face her. She shivers as she tries again this new day to serve and rescue the sick and poor and lost, somehow.

From *the book of light* (1993), "far memory 5"

From the book of light (1993), "far memory 5" Summary

The subtitle of this poem is "sinnerman." It refers to a sexual encounter the nun has had with a priest, who is on top of her without his collar. This happens one night on cold stone, ostensibly in the church somewhere. She feels the priest's fingers "digging," which is a peculiarly unromantic word for a sexual experience. She has almost left this world during the experience and he calls her back, and when she does return, she whispers "hosanna," referring to the wonderful experience, rather than guilt.

From the book of light (1993), "far memory 5" Analysis

The poem's subtitle refers to the priest who has sex with this nun, who already struggles with her passion and thus has yet another struggle. The priest is "collarless," which means that he has taken off his clerical trappings to have sex with the nun. He takes her in an uncomfortable place and uncomfortable way, on cold stone. She seems to have passed out and one would think it is because of trauma, but she indicates that this is not so. She "comes to" calling hosanna at the great experience of sex.

From *the book of light* (1993), "far memory 6"

From the book of light (1993), "far memory 6" Summary

The subtitle of this poem is "karma." It alludes to some of the feelings in poem 4, where the nun feels as though she will never be good enough. The karma to which she refers is in stanza one the weight of the habit, which carries with it all the history of nuns for hundreds of years. The second stanza refers to broken vows and beating of breasts. When the nun prays, each bead beats her up for her sins. The third stanza gives a list of words that produce pain and sorrow, just the sounds of the words. The fourth stanza says that there is no relief for all these things, in this life, no "retreat," a double entendre, and no "sanctuary," also a double entendre. Finally, she realizes that she cannot be whole or steadfast as a nun because of all these things.

From the book of light (1993), "far memory 6" Analysis

Many religions control their people with guilt, and this poem refers to the heavy guilt that the nun carries with her always. The heavy habit is a symbol of this guilt; not only her own, but that of nuns for hundreds of years. She wears beads and prays with them, but the beads only beat her breast for her sins, including the things she is not able to accomplish. The third stanza points out an interesting phenomenon, that even saying certain words can bring heavy guilt and pain, words such as "defend" and "protect," alluding to the inability of this nun to accomplish what she wishes during this life. "Goodbye," "lost" and "alone" are also painful words to hear and say. The final stanza plays on words about religious things, pointing out that the standard relief in religion does not come to her.

From *the book of light* (1993), "far memory 7"

From the book of light (1993), "far memory 7" Summary

The poem is subtitled "gloria mundi," the glory of the world, inferring the material world. The poem explores some of the basic truths of life, what one can really know. First, we can carry little with us, that we carry what we can hold in our "cupped hands" as we are born, or in other words, nothing. Then, some of us are born and some are "brought," inferring individuals not human. Finally, since this poem is speaking from the point of view of the nun, it is much more difficult to serve with focus and selflessness than it is to just have faith.

From the book of light (1993), "far memory 7" Analysis

This is a poem easily understood to be from a nun's point of view. It explores some of the basic things of being mortal in this world, that we have nothing when we are born and also when we leave; that we are born into circumstances outside of our control; and that choosing a higher path is much more difficult than being a person of faith. This poem is tightly written and packs so much universal truth in each small phrase.

From *The Terrible Stories* (1996), "telling our Stories"

From The Terrible Stories (1996), "telling our Stories" Summary

This is first in a series about a fox. It tells of a fox that comes to visit the poet every night and sits all night on the doorstep. The poet sits inside, feeling trapped, wishing the fox would go away but it does not go away. Each sits on the other side of the glass and looks at the other all night. After the fox is gone, the poet wonders if she went home to her village and sang of the poet's hairless face, odd nose, and "ignorant" eyes. The poet apostrophizes a child, as though she is telling this story to a child, and tells the child that what she fears in the fox is not her animal nature, but rather the poet inside the fox and the "terrible stories" she could tell.

From The Terrible Stories (1996), "telling our Stories" Analysis

This poem refers to the fearful power that is inside a poet. It refers to or symbolizes a fox as a storyteller and maker of poems. The poet remains distant from this fox in this poem, staying on one side of a glass door while the fox stays on the other, both looking at the other all night. Each morning the fox leaves and the poet wonders if she goes home and gathers her clan around her, telling all of them of the strange looks of the human. The poem seems to be saying that the poetic and storytelling impulse is as wild and strange as a fox and that it has some will of its own, but it stays patiently for the poet to invite it in.

From *The Terrible Stories* (1996), "fox"

From The Terrible Stories (1996), "fox" Summary

The poem is subtitled from a quote, "... The foxes are hungry, who could blame them for what they do?... ." from "Foxes in Winter" by Mary Oliver

This poem follows in sequence from the one above. It explores further the "fox" nature of the poetic and storytelling impulse. The poem asks who can blame the fox for remaining in the "doorwells at night," waiting for someone to answer her call. The fox brings her nature with her, a bright fire-like tail and "little bared teeth," ready to do the fox's work. The second stanza asks who can blame the fox for addressing the non-observant poet with an upraised paw and a bark, asking "why am i/not feeding, not being fed?"

From The Terrible Stories (1996), "fox" Analysis

Every writer and artist knows the feelings expressed in this poem, as does every person who dares not reveal his or her true self. Here a fox symbolizes the wild and unpredictable and compelling poems and stories and images that want to well up and be expressed. The fox has her own nature, and one could never change the color and size of her tail, her teeth, as revealed in imagery in this poem. The fox is tired of waiting in this poem and asks if anyone can blame her for wanting to feed and be fed. When creative people ignore their impulses to work, the impulse becomes stronger and more insistent, like the fox symbol here.

From *The Terrible Stories* (1996), "the coming of fox"

From The Terrible Stories (1996), "the coming of fox" Summary

In this poem, the poet is becoming a fox, turning into a fox. The fox is still "haunched" by the poet's door, and the poet feels afraid, although the fox is not an enemy and the poet is not an enemy to the fox. The fox sits there night after night, until the poet's skin begins to bleed and the streams of blood resemble red fur.

From The Terrible Stories (1996), "the coming of fox" Analysis

If one follows the metaphor of the fox being the creative impulse, or the fox symbolizing the unrevealed truth of a person, the poet is paying a price for her resistance to doing the work. She knows the fox means her no harm and she is safe for the fox, but the poet continues to watch the fox and not invite her in. However, she begins to bleed, or in other words, the strength of the work, the creative work, is pushing out of her, and she bleeds. The blood looks like fox fur, or in other words, the poet is becoming like a fox without even knowing what to do about it.

From *The Terrible Stories* (1996), "dear fox"

From The Terrible Stories (1996), "dear fox" Summary

The poet has stepped close enough to the fox to speak to it. She tells it that she's not in the habit of squatting out in the desert, working with stones and trying to heal them, but the "dry mornings/and bitter nights" have made her do these things. She tells the fox she knows that it's not her habit just to sit and wait, as the fox is doing for the poet. She calls the fox sister and says that they can step away from these behaviors at any time. She calls all of it "someone else's life."

From The Terrible Stories (1996), "dear fox" Analysis

Here the poet has stepped a little closer to the fox and tells her that she is really not the type of person to work hard to heal things that cannot be healed, symbolized by stones and desert. She is driven to it by the compulsion of "dry mornings/and bitter nights." When she tells the fox that she knows it doesn't usually sit and sit by someone's door, she is creating an alliance with the fox and she tells that fox they can both stop, any time, symbolizing the idea that it is not really necessary to write poetry and create art. This is particularly ironic because it is expressed in a poem.

From *The Terrible Stories* (1996), "leaving fox"

From The Terrible Stories (1996), "leaving fox" Summary

The poet is getting tired of being stuck after a lot of "fuckless" days and nights. At this point, the fox feels compassion for the poet and barks in compassion. The poet cannot receive the compassion of the fox and turns away, looking for something else to help her reveal her art and her nature. She waits for something human to appear.

From The Terrible Stories (1996), "leaving fox" Analysis

Clifton rarely uses profanity, so it has an extra impact when she does. She has had so much time without what she wants that she calls the time "fuckless." In this poem, the fox understands the situation and barks with compassion. Clifton cannot bear the look in the fox's eyes or its compassion so she tries elsewhere to see if the block will break and things will go better for her. She identifies herself as an animal, not the fox. She hopes for "something human" so she keeps her door unlocked. In seeing this as symbolism for the creative process, it is a poignant snapshot into the experience of the writer who is not finding or doing what she needs. To see this as another longing or unfulfilled need, it is not clear what the fox actually symbolizes.

From *The Terrible Stories* (1996), "one year later"

From The Terrible Stories (1996), "one year later" Summary

This poem takes place a year from the previous one, according to the title. It is a meditation on what might have happened if the fox had actually entered the room and extended an invitation, holding out her paw. If the poet follows her, what will happen? The poem ends with the question of how it will affect everything, including "the poetry of regret."

From The Terrible Stories (1996), "one year later" Analysis

From this poem, the reader knows that the writer somehow chose not to follow the fox. Whatever the animal symbolizes, whether it is the call of the creative process, the call to love, or some other unknown symbol, Clifton does not follow. After a whole year, she wonders what will have happened if she did follow. She imagines that the fox crosses the boundary of the glass door and comes into her house and invites her out. She imagines the fox touching the shadows of her house and changing their color to the color of its fur. If she follows the fox, she will have embraced fox-ness, "baying" and going with the fox to "vixen country." She will have left behind the familiar, including her home and the kind of poetry she has written.

From *The Terrible Stories* (1996), "a dream of foxes"

From The Terrible Stories (1996), "a dream of foxes" Summary

The meaning of the fox becomes more clear in this poem. In it, the poet dreams of foxes, and a field where women are clean, considered good, and are safe. In this dream, the women experience all good things that they often miss in the real world, including acceptance and safety, as symbolized by the absence of being torn up by dogs and having their fur torn and bloody. In this dream, the poet sees a "lovely line" of women walking secure and confident through "generous fields."

From The Terrible Stories (1996), "a dream of foxes" Analysis

More even than the call to the creative process, this poem now reveals the symbol of foxes as being the elemental nature of being a woman, which is looked down upon in a man-dominated world. Women often feel the call to be genuine but turn their backs on it; however,in this dream the women step forward and walk confidently and "without fear or guilt or shame" to be a genuine self and receive the gifts of the "generous fields," which symbolize having enough and more than enough.

From *The Terrible Stories* (1996), "amazons"

From The Terrible Stories (1996), "amazons" Summary

This is one of the most directly personal of Clifton's poems. In it, she is waiting for the news of whether she has breast cancer or not. She is surrounded by a group of women whom she calls a "rookery," and since she also calls them "daughters of dahomey," a former west African country, one can assume that they are black friends. They are also cancer survivors, each having just one breast, which she holds in her hands. The women are Amazons here in the poem, great strong warrior women. Not only are Clifton's real friends there, but also the ancestors of generations past, supporting her. When she runs to the telephone for the news, she already knows it somehow, writing the poem beforehand. The friends, the Amazons, dance around her. There is an allusion to "audre," another woman poet who has written about breast cancer.

From The Terrible Stories (1996), "amazons" Analysis

This is a brilliant poem because it transcends the actual moment into an exploration of generations past as well as to the universality of women supporting each other through a dreadful experience, the specter of breast cancer. All the women in the circle are mastectomy survivors, and Clifton has had tests to see if she too will lose a breast. It is a poem about the power of women sustaining each other through difficult times.

From *The Terrible Stories* (1996), "lumpectomy eve"

From The Terrible Stories (1996), "lumpectomy eve" Summary

This is a vignette of the night before surgery to remove a lump, perhaps cancerous. Clifton dreams of nursing a baby and that somehow the hunger of the baby turns in on the breast itself and begins to destroy it. She realizes that having the surgery comes from love, keeping herself alive. The last couplet is poignant, where one breast comforts the other all during the long night.

From The Terrible Stories (1996), "lumpectomy eve" Analysis

This poem reveals how women struggle to deal with impending breast surgery, and the nursing imagery carries some irony, because the breast has served in love but then turns "on itself" and can kill the woman. Clifton's line, "love calls you to this knife" reveals that it might be easier not to even do the surgery, but because she loves others and is loved, she does it. The last couplet is charming, because the breast comforts an infant earlier in life but now the one breast comforts the other. It is a sweet metaphor.

From *The Terrible Stories* (1996), "1994"

From The Terrible Stories (1996), "1994" Summary

This is a reflective poem about getting older and facing breast cancer. The poet is almost turning fifty-nine when she hears the news that she might have cancer. She symbolizes it as a "thumb of ice/stamped itself near my heart." She apostrophizes an unnamed reader, enjoining empathy with the situation, because both the reader and the poet have known these troubling types of experiences. She realizes that she can have lied to herself about what could happen. She says it is dangerous to have breasts, to "wear dark skin." In this poem, she realizes, via the metaphor of a cold winter, that she is mortal. She has tried to be a good person but still faces this dreadful illness and ends the poem with a word to the reader, who already knows all these things.

From The Terrible Stories (1996), "1994" Analysis

This poem addresses the central issue of having tried to be "good children" and still have a horrible thing such as breast cancer happen to us. The poem contains strong imagery of winter landscape, such as ice and icicles, representing the chill of facing mortal illness. Clifton refers to how hard it is to be a black woman and how hard to have breasts. She includes a Bible reference, "did we not inherit the earth," referring to her efforts at being a good person, a meek person. She universalizes the poem and avoids self-pity in it by including the reader as an ally.

From *The Terrible Stories* (1996), "hag riding"

From The Terrible Stories (1996), "hag riding" Summary

This poem explores the link between being a black and having African ancestry, which Clifton refers to as "afrikan." When the poet awakens in the morning, when it's hot, she sees herself "galloping down the highway" of her life, and she feels hope. She is so motivated by this uprising of hope that she runs out into the road. Then follows a charming metaphor. She climbs onto the day the way one mounts a horse, and the last line says, "i ride i ride."

From The Terrible Stories (1996), "hag riding" Analysis

The title of the poem is a gentle irony, gently poking fun at the poet herself. She identifies the passion and drive with which she greets and wakens to the day with being from Africa, especially when the day is hot. She wonders if the burst of energy is herself trying to get back to Africa, after all the years. On a hot morning, she finds herself metaphorically running out into the road, getting on the horse of the day and riding, riding. The imagery is so visceral, so kinesthetic, and the song of the poem echoes the movement of the images.

From *The Terrible Stories* (1996), "rust"

From The Terrible Stories (1996), "rust" Summary

The poem is subtitled, "we don't like rust,/it reminds us that we are dying," by Brett Singer. It addresses ostensibly this poet and asks a series of questions. The first asks if iron "understands" that time and God are synonymous. Next is the question if a "rain-licked" pot or pan has holiness, and next asks if an abandoned pan is holy too. The next image flashes back to cooking as a young girl, if those abandoned pans have holiness. Finally, the question really seems to be not about the pans but about the fine memories of mothers cooking in pans, handles of "ebony patience" and a beautiful shine.

From The Terrible Stories (1996), "rust" Analysis

This is another poignant recollection that speaks to those whose mothers cooked for them. Little girls like to play house but they are mostly moved by the mothers' strength and beauty in cooking. The poem moves through a series of images of pans that have gotten old and rusted, but finally ends up with the realization that those old, rusty pans are not what is precious and holy. The memories of a mother's cook pans with lovely, heavy, well-used handles is what is worth remembering, what is holy.

From *The Terrible Stories* (1996), "slaveships"

From The Terrible Stories (1996), "slaveships" Summary

This is a poem speaking collectively from the point of view of those who are captured and brought on slave ships to be slaves. Ironically, the ships are called with religious names such as Jesus, Angel of God, and Grace of God. The people in the ships have barely survived, and many of them have not. They have been "loaded like spoons" in the deep holds of these ships, not able to breathe or get clean. Although they pray, and they are traveling in ships with holy names, there is no answer to their prayers. They wonder if the men who captured them can even be real men, for the obscene treatment they have received. They feel that they can never speak again, nor walk, after their experience. They wonder if the men can even be allowed to live, after doing what they do.

From The Terrible Stories (1996), "slaveships" Analysis

This poem is visceral and full of powerful mourning. The simple image of being packed like spoons, followed with the words about sweat and foul breathing, are almost more than the reader may be able to bear. The irony of traveling in ships with spiritual names appears repeatedly in the piece. The men "vomit" the slaves out of the ships, emphasizing the dehumanizing of the people stolen as slaves. The slaves wonder if they can ever speak or walk again, and they wonder how the sin of this experience, the sin done to them, can even be in this world. It is a cry, this poem, a howl of pain and horror as the poet imagines what it is to have suffered in the slave ships.

From *The Terrible Stories* (1996), "memphis"

From The Terrible Stories (1996), "memphis" Summary

This poem is subtitled, "...at the river i stand,/guide my feet, hold my hand".

This poem is a sequence of flashes of feelings and understandings about rivers. Clifton says that she is raised on the shore of Lake Erie, calling it "e" for escape, ostensibly as the family escapes from what it is to be black in the south. She refers to the s's in Mississippi, which are more than her mother's sons. The poet refers again, as in other poems to "dahomey," a west African nation now called Benin, which nation is so distant from America. She moves images to the letter s, thinking of slavery that she says happens near Memphis, Tennessee. The Mississippi does not recognize the "northern born" poet. Her images are northern, Canada, Toronto. However, images of Memphis appear in the poet's dreams as a child. She knows she could be terrorized there. She recalls the names of civil rights workers murdered there. Her mother's son does not perish in civil rights struggles, dying "gently" in the north. However, the experience of rivers pulls her back toward the south. She knows she doesn't even know how to swim, and wonders if she will "float or drown" in the Mississippi, connecting that image with the foreignness of being a black transplanted into America.

From The Terrible Stories (1996), "memphis" Analysis

This is an interesting shifting of one image to another. The poet's experience in life has been in the north, where her parents have moved to escape the terrors of living as a black in the south. The water in the poem connects the two places. The poet lives near big water, Lake Erie, yet she has images of the Mississippi River recurring in her mind and dreams, especially when she is a child. She knows and feels deeply the stories of the civil rights workers, whom she names, and the recitation of the names reflects the deep grief of the loss of their lives. The poet returns again and again to the frightening image of the Mississippi near Memphis and feels she could drown, not knowing how to swim in that river, symbolizing the difference of living in the north from the south. She thinks of Africa and how that place is so different from America.

From *The Terrible Stories* (1996), "memory"

From The Terrible Stories (1996), "memory" Summary

This short poem is a contraposition of two conflicting memories. The first is an image of the poet's mother dissolving under the dismal treatment of a shoe salesman. The mother says she doesn't remember it that way, that no salesman mistreated her. She was never furious at such treatment. She only remembers how Clifton got her first pair of "grown up" shoes. The poet is stricken by the contrast in these experiences.

From The Terrible Stories (1996), "memory" Analysis

In this poem, like most mothers, Clifton's mother does not remember a memory that is vivid to the poet, who remembers a prejudiced shoe salesman, arrogant and dismissive, and how angry it makes her feel. The mother, wishing to protect the child, will not recall that memory, so powerful to the girl. Instead, she is proud of her child and wants to remember instead how proud she is when the girl gets her first adult-style shoes. The poet is almost speechless with the conflicting feelings this all brings. She apostrophizes the reader, asking him or her to ask her how it feels. It is a poem that brilliantly reflects the deep emotions experienced growing up with prejudice and with parents who want the best for children and therefore do not discuss the hard things.

From *The Terrible Stories* (1996), "what did she know, when did she know it"

From The Terrible Stories (1996), "what did she know, when did she know it" Summary

This poem gives a series of images of a child experiencing sexual abuse. She hears a soft "tap" coming into her room. She feels cold as the sheet is pulled off her and she feels the abuser's fingers going into her. She feels the wall cold against her as she pulls hard away from the abuser. She feels cold air, "cold edges." This little girl does not smile and no one asks why. She says that mothers know everything, so her mother must know what happens. She asks what her mom really knows and when she knows it.

From The Terrible Stories (1996), "what did she know, when did she know it" Analysis

This short poem is painful; a recollection of what it feels to be a child violated by an abuser. The images are all about the child's experience, because she is not a sexual person yet and can only experience what happens in terms of discomfort, including much coldness, which can be symbolic of what happens to the child inside. She pulls herself hard against a cold wall, and perhaps such a wall grows inside her because this child never smiles. Doesn't anyone want to know why? Certainly her mother must know, because from a child's point of view, a mother knows everything, and the reader agrees that everything in a home usually is known by the mother. The last lines are a cry out, asking what the mother actually knows and when she realizes what is happening to the daughter. Inferred is the question why the mother never helps the child.

From *The Terrible Stories* (1996), "lorena"

From The Terrible Stories (1996), "lorena" Summary

In the original publication, the subtitle reads thus: "Woman cuts off husband's penis/Later throws it from the car window," News Report. This poem opens with a sensory experience of holding the penis in the cupped hand of the woman. She says the penis trembles like a new bird. The woman goes into the thoughts about the penis, how she feels about a person who insists on being in charge, who promises that life will be good if one just obeys him. The abused woman always believes these things, and so when the woman, who has stopped sexual abuse, opens the window to throw out the penis, she still holds onto the beliefs that keep her trapped, that there really is good there. She believes that like a bird, the penis will fly.

From The Terrible Stories (1996), "lorena" Analysis

This poem explores the strange mixed nature of abuse. The woman in the story has taken matters in her own hand, literally, by cutting off her husband's penis, driving away with it. She thinks about how her husband and other such people insist on being in authority, being obeyed, and promise that life will be good for those who obey. Women who have been abused feel that these promises will hold good, if not this time, because there was pain, well, then next time. It is the horrible trap of abuse, and the woman, who has stopped the sexual abuse for good this time because she has done the violent act of cutting off a penis, still holds the mythical idea that the penis itself has power. She imagines it will fly away like a little bird, imaged in the second line, or perhaps as an angel, imaged in the third to last line.

From *The Terrible Stories* (1996), "heaven"

From The Terrible Stories (1996), "heaven" Summary

This poem imagines the poet's brother, long since deceased, sitting with a group of "cloudy" friends in heaven. The poet says she has always been able to feel him there, looking down at her. When the brother is alive, the poet tries to explain heaven to the boy, and he just laughs. He laughs again now, in heaven, and tells his friends about his sister. He says, "even when she was right, she was wrong."

From The Terrible Stories (1996), "heaven" Analysis

This poem is a sweet imagining, an amalgam of spiritual experience and memories of a brother lost to death. The poet has tried to explain the afterlife to the boy while he is still alive, but it makes no sense to him. He just laughs. Now he has been in Heaven a long time and the poet always feels him there. She seems to see him with a group of friends, and they are watching her. The boy explains his sister to the group. He appreciates her for telling him about Heaven, which she gets partly right and partly wrong. The poem is poignant, longing and full of love for the lost brother.

Characters

The moonchild

Since this is a collection of poetry, there are no actual characters, no plot, no links from one piece to another. Each stands alone. However, Clifton refers to several characters more than once. She refers to herself as a child by her maiden name, Sayles, written with the lower case. She often explores Biblical characters, such as Lot, Adam and Eve, Christ, and Lucifer or Satan. She personifies inanimate objects or conditions, particularly in her famous menstruation and menopause poems. Taken as a composite, these brief vignettes of characterization establish Clifton as a thoughtful believer, a Christian, a Bible scholar, and an unflinchingly honest woman writer.

Moonchild is a word for an abused girl child, possibly Clifton herself. She looks at the other girls who are imagining sex, while she herself knows all about it, having had it at the hands of her father.

The nameless black slave man

This man symbolizes all the slaves who lived and died without having the basic needs met, such as having a land, home, even care for himself such as a dentist.

j.byrd

This is the man who was tied to a truck and dragged to death in Texas.

Cynthia, Carole, Denise, Addie Mae

These four girls were in the explosion in a church in Selma, Alabama, in 1963.

Lazarus

This is the biblical character who died and was raised from the grave by Jesus Christ in the New Testament. The poems about Lazarus analyze his inner experiences.

The angel of Eden

This character notices Adam and Eve, and indeed all the creatures in the garden of Eden, having sex, and commenting that they have taken power of heaven.

God

This character looks like the poet's grandfather. He gives gifts to the poet because she has tried to hard to be good.

Thelma Sayles

This is the grown-up version of the girl who has been abused. She can look at the abused girl and love her and bless her because she has overcome.

Fred Clifton

This is the poet's deceased husband.

The shapeshifter

This is the father of the little girl who is abused. She thinks of him as a shapeshifter because a real father can never hurt a child.

White lady

This is a characterization of cocaine.

Lucifer

This is the devil, the "son of the morning," "lightbringer," or Satan. The poems explore the complexity of his nature.

Adam and Eve

This is the first man and the first woman who live in the Garden of Eden. The poems explore how discovering sex gives them the power of God.

Objects/Places

North Carolina

This is a reference to an unnamed place where there was a slave cabin, where the poet pours out a worshipful libation to a man who wanted the basics of life but was denied them because of slavery.

Jasper, Texas

Here a black man was dragged behind a pickup to his death. The poem by the same name relives the incident.

Selma, Alabama

Here the famous incident took place where a church was bombed and three innocent teenage girls were killed. The poem is a shrine to them.

Lazarus' Cave

There are several poems exploring the incident in the Bible, in the location near Jerusalem, where Jesus Christ raised Lazarus from the dead.

Memphis, Tennessee

In a poem named Memphis, the poet explores this place and how it formed the point of view and life of the poet's family.

Uterus

This somewhat controversial subject is addressed in the poem entitled, "poem to my uterus." In it, the poet examines her feelings about her body part that has been removed in a hysterectomy.

11 Harwood Place

This is a childhood home, long left, of the poet. In the poem, "lot's wife, 1988," the poet explores the meaning of homes left behind.

Menstruation

Clifton is known for addressing strong womanly topics. In "poem in praise of menstruation," she lauds the power that menstruation and childbearing bring women.

Eden

A good number of poems address what Eden might have meant to Adam, to Eve, to Lucifer, and to angels. Eden is a pivotal point because it brings sexuality into the world, thus taking creation out of God's hands only.

The Dream world

Many of Clifton's poems are remembrances and analyses of her own dreams. She finds meaning in writing poems about the images and messages in her dreams.

Slave ships

In a poem by the same name, Clifton examines the physicality and brutality of people's experiences on the slave ships as they came to America.

Themes

To be a Woman is a Powerful Thing

Clifton is most famous for her poems about womanly matters, although her range of topics and the strength of her writing go much further than these famous pieces. However, she is especially powerful when writing about the goodness and potential of being a woman. Clifton does not spare the reader the realities of being a woman in today's society, because there is struggle and pain and disappointment in being a woman today. At the same time, Clifton asserts the positive aspects of womanhood. In "moonchild," she explores the poignant contraposition of being innocent girls wondering about sexuality with the sad secrets a sexually abused girl holds.

In "donor," she talks about a beloved child coming from an unwanted pregnancy, including dark images of the interior of a woman's body during pregnancy. In "birthday 1999," Clifton reveals a repeating dream she has about a train, symbolizing her life that has been passing by, including a hysterectomy. In "report from the angel of eden," Clifton imaginatively recreates what an angel might have thought, watching the new man and woman having sex, knowing that sex echoes the potential and power of God him or herself.

"Female" is a short, sweet piece indicating the power of womanliness, part of which comes from the act of giving birth. "My dream about falling" mixes the images of an apple blossom, a fruit, and the mature fruit falling from the tree, all wound up in the essence of being a woman. In "the death of thelma sayles," Clifton sees herself as a child become strong from the love and nurture of being a mother. She becomes a mother to herself, the little child of herself. In "the message of thelma sayles," the poet advises girls to get through the terrible pain of menstruation by turning their pain into poetry. The "shapeshifter poems" explore the horror of being a child of sexual abuse, coming to some point of healing and recovery of personal power at the end.

The famed "poem in praise of menstruation" reveals how menstruating connects women to a long history and to each other, clear back to mother eve, mentioning that there is no more powerful stream than this stream of menstruation. In "poem to my uterus," Clifton apostrophizes her uterus that she lost in a hysterectomy, similar to "to my last period," where she speaks to the final period of her life, ending that period of her life. "Song at midnight" speaks to men of the beauty of a woman, however old. The "leda" series explores the character in the myth, including her powerlessness before a god who claims her. "Lumpectomy eve" shows the feelings Clifton has as she waits during the night after having a lump removed from her breast. "What did she know when did she know it" talks about a mother's growing knowledge of her girl-child's sexual abuse.

In all, these poems in this collection celebrate the spectrum of a woman's experience and make it powerful, even when it is painful.

Biblical Stories Reveal Depth when Explored

Lucille Clifton knows her Bible. Her poems exploring biblical themes are delightful because they challenge the standard interpretations of Bible stories by going deeper into the mind and heart of each character. This is a pleasant way of exploring the familiar Bible stories. The poems bring a smile to the lips of appreciation for a new twist on things Biblical. For example, the three "lazarus" poems give a glimpse of Lazarus' experience while he was dead, how he traveled back to life, and then his disappointment at being brought back into the mortal sphere. "Report from the angel of eden" reveals that Adam and Eve, having sex, have trodden into the world of the gods, where sexuality somehow confers power. The angel has never had sex, evidently, but recognizes the movement as dancing, as angelic worship, and he fears that Adam and Eve and other mortals, will misuse the power. "lot's wife" compares the looking-back of lot's wife to the looking-back of Clifton herself, to her childhood, trying to own and recover the images and "weeds" of the houses she has lived in.

The "lucifer" poems explore the nature of Satan, pointing out that he started innocent and good, and that he had much power and beauty about him. "adam thinking" and "eve thinking" discuss the odd, sometimes uncomfortable connectedness of being a new man and woman, reflecting on the larger nature of man/woman relationships. "Lucifer speaking in his own voice" reveals how Lucifer believes that he is doing a good thing by becoming who he is, because he reveals the truth to people. In all, these poems make the Bible more accessible, more interesting and more human by their explorations.

Poems Reveal Our Truths to Us

Clifton has the ultimate poetic gift of clear language exploring personal experience made universal by the poetic medium. The greatest strength of her poems is linking the reader, through her language and imagery, to universal human experience. For example, Clifton writes a series of female poems about body parts and functions that most people deign to talk about. She writes about something that probably every girl and woman has secretly wished, that men and boys could experience, just once, the horrible pain of menstrual cramps and the frustration of having your period come when you're wearing white clothing, have no pads or tampons, and are far away from home. She mourns the loss of her last period when she enters menopause, again a typical Clifton twist on things, because many women rejoice when their periods finally end. She mourns the loss of her uterus when she has to have a hysterectomy.

She struggles with the strangeness of losing part of a breast, and gives the charming image of one breast comforting the other through the night. She struggles with the loss of her husband but transcends this loss, thus helping readers understand the process of transcending, knowing that her husband is rejoicing in the afterlife, another strong indicator of Clifton's apparent deep Christianity and belief in spiritual things. She herself struggles with the process of facing a possible cancer, and finds her core and her courage.

She also addresses very difficult subjects. One such thread throughout the poems is the sexual abuse of a child, perhaps herself, by a trusted father. She looks almost at a distance at the girls who innocently wonder about French kissing and lovemaking, and she feels left out and abandoned because she has already experienced these things firsthand. She works through dreams and imagery to rid herself of the patterns and pains that sexual abuse bring. She also writes about the brutality of racism. In several poems, she enters into the minds and hearts and bodies of those who suffered racist slavery and torture, making these experiences universal without coming across as nasty or bitter. Because she writes in a loving and gentle way, even looking at hard truths such as abuse, slavery, and racism becomes softened because of Clifton's generous soul. Imagine someone writing with such understanding and kindness about Lucifer, who is considered the enemy of mankind. By infusing hard subjects with understanding, Clifton makes it easier to deal with them, to live with them. Thus her poems transcend being art and move into being vehicles of healing.

Style

Points of View

There are several points of view in this collection. One of course is the poet's voice herself, which appears frequently throughout. However, the poet also speaks from the point of view of many different characters in the world and in literature. One of the most interesting aspects of Clifton's work regarding points of view comes with the biblical characters' analyses in this collection. At one time, she speaks from her own point of view as an adult looking back at her life as an abused child, a woman who has overcome the abuse and stands there encouraging and healing the child. At another time, she is Lazarus raised from the dead, relating his mixed feelings at being brought back from the world of light. At one time, she is Lot's wife, who looks back in longing at the only home she has had. Next time she is Adam, next time Eve, both of them locked in their own minds and experiences as they join in the creation of the world, shaping the new world by the creation of sex between them.

Another time she is a slave man, weeping because of the many opportunities that could never be his. And many times she is Satan, Lucifer, who gives up his heavenly home because he thinks he can influence the creation of this new world. Another time she is a yeti, the mythical abominable snowman, who is unable to understand the unhealthy craziness of modern people in a modern world where he has ventured, so he must return home to his village. Another time she is her husband Fred, who has died and rejoices in the beauty and comfort of homecoming to the celestial world. Another time she is a crab! This crab is a poet who sees his kin being captured and eaten, knowing that the crab itself cannot know how sweet its meat is, just as the poet cannot know how sweet her work is. Several pieces speak from the point of view of Leda, who was coupled with by a god in the form of a swan. Several poems in a sequence speak from the mind and heart of a fox.

This changing of points of view, this speaking from others' minds and hearts, is another of Clifton's genius gifts. She puts herself into the characters' insides so she can speak their truths. These truths are so genuine, so real, that one believes s/he is reading the real thing! The points of view change the reader's mind and heart.

Setting

There is little to say about the setting in this collection of poetry other than what is written in the Summary and Analysis section, because each takes place in its own world, sometimes based on a realistic happening but sometimes just based in the world of imagination.

Language and Meaning

These poems are gentle, spare, and beautifully written. They are free verse, but they frequently scan iambic with occasional rhymes and close rhymes. They refer to people and places with meaning to the poet as well as with universal themes. They are very personal poems, made universal by the poet's personal voice. Sometimes the poems are stinging commentaries on racism and the usual accepted images that make up modern life. Clifton frowns on people who only subscribe to the society's vision of what is beautiful, what is desirable. She points out that the elderly are also loveable and sweet and deserving of love. She points out that those who perished at the hands of racists were innocent and undeserving of the brutality of their fates. Clifton does this in spare, barely angry language. One feels the passion of her words under the spare, cut-down images and short lines of her poems.

When the passion and social commentary of the poems seem to become too acerbic, they are always tempered by an overarching kindness and compassion central to Clifton's style. This is what makes her poetry transcendent and permanent, because she is not just a feminist poet, not just a black poet, not even just a woman poet, but she is a universalist, extending compassion even to the most difficult of circumstances, such as cancer, loss of a spouse, bitter racial prejudice, and sexual abuse. Her gentle touch softens the misery of these difficult situations, imparting love and compassion.

These poems are in the modern, informal style of poetry. They echo the sounds of iambic quadrameter and pentameter, but they are surely not formalized that much. Occasionally there will be a rhyme, but rarely so. The images are startling and fresh, but never so much so as to be brutal. For example, in "imagining bear," the poet sees her grandfather as a bear, and the images stop short of being insulting but are not particularly flattering, either. The biblical poems sometimes reflect the cadence of scriptural language although the suggestions made in the poem are hardly reverent. They instead remake one's possible understanding of what the Bible actually intended, particularly examining the emergence of sexuality as a way of people claiming their own creativity and power in a new world, stepping away from God but at the same time becoming like Him.

The poems almost always avoid capitalization, although occasionally there will appear a capitalization, either to satirize something, as in "the women you are accustomed to," where France is capitalized to symbolize false value in knowing things of France, or sometimes to revere something, as when referring to God.

The line breaks usually follow conversational rhythm, though sometimes they break in order to emphasize meaning or make a passionate comment. Sometimes there is punctuation and sometimes not, depending on the cadence and rhythm and meaning of the poem. As an example, in "lot's wife, 1988," the last two lines go, "surer than salt and write this, yes/i promise, yes we will," lines that echo e. e. cummings' selective use of punctuation.

The poems almost always end with a punch line, creating an aha! response in the reader. They are like the punch line to jokes, the way to understand everything that came before. This is a pleasant and interesting poetic device that keeps the reader engaged and interested until the end.

Interestingly, the poet avoids being obscure or intentionally hard to understand. This must be the earmark of Louise Clifton's poetry, that she writes passionately, intensely personally, and lyrically, but she remains universal in language and style so that anyone can find meaning and delight in her verses. Even when she writes about herself as a young person, about her deceased husband, or anyone else she knows, such as her friend who had a baby about the same time she did, the friend she grew up with, the verses remain universal so that everyone can relate to the experience; as in this case, having girls grow up more independent and healthy than their mothers, rejoicing in that freedom. This ability to write clearly and passionately at the same time takes a great deal of courage. Many modern poets miss the boat by being so personal that one can hardly understand their references. Part of Clifton's genius must be this universal voice.

The poems use extended metaphor, such as the poems about the fox, and also use apostrophe, such as the many poems speaking from others' point of view. Although the poems are not allegorical, they sometimes refer to allegories and references to mythology.

Structure

This book is a collection of poetry from different parts of the poet's life. Except for the first set, "*New Poems*," all the other poems are reprinted from other collections. These include "next," 1988; "*quilting*," 1991; "*the book of light*," 1993; and "*The Terrible Stories*" 1996. Sometimes there are references within these selections from the poet's life, although it is never clear whether the hysterectomy, loss of husband, lumpectomy, and other experiences occur during the actual time of the book unless they are dated, as is the poem about her husband's death, "the death of fred clifton." In a word, this collection has no particular structure except that it begins with the poet's most recent works, then begins with selections from her earliest published work and moves forward.

Quotes

"even when she was right, she was wrong." p. 127

"so many questions/northern born." p. 123

"all night it is the one breast/comforting the other." p. 117

"what entered the light was one man./what walked out is another." p. 27

"and it seemed like dancing/as when we angels/praise among the clouds" p. 32

"but there's no future/in those clothes/so I take them off and/wake up/dancing." p. 41

"all of the clocks strike/NO." p. 43

"mothering/has made it strong," p. 48

"white lady/what do we have to pay/to repossess our children." pp. 60-61

"he was the first thing she saw/and she blamed him." p. 63

"beautiful and faithful and ancient/and female and brave." p. 64.

"it is your own lush self/you hunger for." p. 75.

"and may you in your innocence/sail through this to that." p. 82.

"who will hold her,/who will find her beautiful/if you do not?" p. 87.

"it was the poet in her, the poet and/*The Terrible Stories* she could tell." p. 109.

Topics for Discussion

Is it appropriate to write poems about such personal topics as menstruation, hysterectomy, breast lumps, and other such things?

Compare the story of Lazarus in the Bible to the characterizations revealed by Clifton.

Discuss Clifton's poems about sexual abuse and how her imagery suggests healing from such abuse.

Discuss Clifton's poems about racism and compare them with other black writers who discuss racism.

Clifton often uses animal imagery in her poetry. Point out several good examples and explain how the images work in the poems.

Compare the Leda story with Clifton's "leda" poems.

Where is Clifton's poetry coming from, from a sociological perspective?