

Poems by Lucille Clifton

cruelty. don't talk to me about cruelty

cruelty. don't talk to me about cruelty
or what i am capable of.

when i wanted the roaches dead i wanted them dead
and i killed them. i took a broom to their country

and smashed and sliced without warning
without stopping and i smiled all the time i was doing it.

it was a holocaust of roaches, bodies,
parts of bodies, red all over the ground.

i didn't ask their names.
they had no names worth knowing.

now i watch myself whenever i enter a room.
i never know what i might do.

what spells raccoon to me

what spells raccoon to me
spells more than just his
bandit's eyes
squinting as his furry woman
hunkers down among the fists
of berries.
oh coon
which gave my grandfather a name
and fed his wife on more than one
occasion
i can no more change my references
than they can theirs.

Lucille Clifton (1936 – 2010) served as Distinguished Professor of Humanities at St. Mary's College of Maryland, Chancellor of the Academy of American Poets, and Poet Laureate of the State of Maryland from 1974 to 1985. She was elected a Fellow of the American Academy in 1999. Her poetry collections include "Blessing the Boats: New and Selected Poems, 1988 – 2000" (2000), which won a National Book Award; "Good Woman: Poems and a Memoir, 1969 – 1980" (1987) and "Next: New Poems" (1987), both of which were nominated for a Pulitzer Prize; and "Two-Headed Woman" (1980), which was also a Pulitzer Prize nominee and the recipient of the University of Massachusetts Press Juniper Prize. "cruelty. don't talk to me about cruelty" and "what spells raccoon to me," from "Next: New Poems," by Lucille Clifton, © 1987, are reprinted with the permission of BOA Editions, Ltd.
