

POETRY AND DIALOGUE
with CLIFF FYMAN

IF YOU SEE SOMETHING...

say something.

Say something if something something if.

If something something if say something.

If you don't see something

like, say,

one single African-American waiter or waitress

in the restaurant where you eat or work

in a city of millions

say something.

If I've done something wrong to you—

I goof up all the time—alert me!

Say something

but put it easy.

Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists, atheists, Christians, Jews.

A time, say, of studying all the faiths.

Me understanding them

and them understanding me.

Freedom of freedom of

freedom freedom of of of.

If you see say O say can you see

by the orange alert?

No, I can't see anything

in an orange alert.

But I can see everything

by the light of a poem.

Can you see me?

Can you hear me?

Do I know you?
Can we trust each other?
Say something.

INTERVIEW WITH ST. JOHN'S UNIVERSITY WORKSHOP - SPRING 2007

ST. JOHN'S: It seems as if "If You See Something..." hinges on a distinction between being clear in an open way with being vague in a threatening way as in:

No, I can't see anything
in an orange alert.
But I can see everything
by the light of a poem.

Could you talk about those four lines in relation to the rest of the poem?

CLIFF FYMAN: Your description of the poem's contrasts is accurate. When the part about the orange alert, which I suspect whips up our emotions and prevents us from seeing each other accurately, leads into the lines, "But I can see everything/ by the light of the poem," it's kind of an affirmation of the act of writing a poem, that writing a poem can get us to a nobler place, can create clarity.

SJ: You imply that the restaurant only having one African-American waiter is an outrage. Could you say something more about this?

CF: I don't know if it's an outrage but it's an issue I think about, and I haven't had a chance to discuss it much with others. Probably one aspect of the issue is this. In big restaurants and hotels, where I've worked for over twenty years, and in the city's hotel and restaurant workers union, the work staff is in fact largely Hispanic. I've heard that employers are hesitant to introduce African-Americans into a largely Hispanic work force because employers fear there'll be excessive tension between those two groups. I feel I lose in getting to work with a section of the population that I'd like to know better. There's tension

between lots of groups, and it works out ok somehow if management and employees work at it. In smaller restaurants where the work force is Caucasian and otherwise I still notice under-representation. I'm not sure what's going on. If African-Americans don't want to be waiters, that's one thing, but I don't know if that's the case.

SJ: Could you talk about the contingencies implicit in the words "something" and "if" in the poem's first two lines? What do you make of how those words combine and repeat?

CF: The poem is a response to the current subway ad campaign, "If You See Something, Say Something," which disturbs me. The ad is a post-9/11 campaign asking subway riders to alert authorities if they spot an unattended package, and in general help foil a bomb plot or something, but the ad isn't really specific. I don't know how helpful the ad really is. Its vagueness ("if" "something") may cause riders to cast suspicions on other innocent riders. We all know an ad like this shows how the government has replaced the phrase from the past, "communist threat," with today's phrase, "terrorist threat." Plus it seems the government is painting all Muslims with a broad brush, the peaceful devotees who are our fellow New Yorkers along with the violent fundamentalists. At least that's the way I subjectively start reading into the ad. The government got caught by surprise on 9/11 and now it wants to show that it's on top of things, I guess. The words "something" and "if" when left open to interpretation become tools of suggestion and manipulation. The opening lines in my poem are a gut reaction aimed to parody the language of what I feel is a bad ad.

Repeating the words "something" and "if" also becomes a rhetorical device, a way of connecting all the parts of the poem. I rely on the repetition of those words to keep the poem going in a sense.

By the way, I've seen where other poets have written poems that tackle the same ad about the same way I have, almost like it's become an instant genre poem which is interesting.

SJ: The start of the poem seems to swerve and rotate in a Gertrude Stein style, but then moves into a declarative discursive mode. Do you agree? Could you elaborate?

CF: I think the swerving of language is purely expressive, a way of channeling my anger toward the ad, twisting the ad's syntax around. The poem pulls back and forth between abstraction and realism for a while. When what I want to say becomes clear to me, the poem turns to a declarative, narrative realism.

SJ: Could you talk about your (and/or this poem's) relation to readers and listeners? How does the poem change between hearing it and reading it?

CF: I like reading the poem to an audience because I can usually feel right there if the poem goes over or not. I don't know who my readers are most of the time so I can't say much about that. I try to make the poem effective on the page by placing the words and lines in such a way as to convey the oral rhythms. I read the poem aloud many times to myself while re-writing.

SJ: Could you describe how you wrote "If You See Something..."? How long did it take? Where were you? How much did you revise?

CF: I started writing the poem in a pocket notebook on the "A" train to Kennedy airport after hearing if-you-see-something-say-something announced over the intercom system while I was standing on the West 4th Street subway platform. It was Friday morning, November 18, 2005. I was flying to my friend's son's bar-mitzvah in the S.F. Bay Area. That weekend I stayed alone in a motel in Richmond, CA, and I finished writing the first draft in my room. I edited it a little bit now and then during the following year, sometimes putting in more abstract language then taking it out. It was a list poem at first taking aim at many social causes, and I reduced it because I thought a long list might give readers a big headache. I finished editing with a couple of significant changes the afternoon I planned to read it at The Poetry Project's recent benefit reading on January 1, 2007.

SJ: Could you talk about some poems and/or poets that seem especially influential to the writing of "If You See Something...?"

CF: The starting point for the poem linguistically happened to have been an Emily Dickinson poem I was listening to in my kitchen on a tape recited by Julie Harris. I'd borrowed the tape from the Mid-Manhattan library.

My river runs to thee:
Blue sea, wilt welcome me?

My river waits reply.
Oh sea, look graciously!

I'll fetch thee books
From spotted nooks,--

Say, sea,
Take me!

I played with some of the sound combinations of her poem. (E.g. "If you see say O say can you see...")

You say "put it easy." Do you feel someone is speaking in anger or peacefully?

SJ: Like all of us, I'm more willing to take criticism when I botch something up if the criticism is said in a certain way. If it's too strong with too much anger coming at me, I'll probably be on the defensive and fight back.

Is this poem addressed to any person in particular? The end seems to be someone in particular.

CF: No, the ending doesn't have a specific person in mind.

SJ: You seem to think no one will hear you, that you are insignificant. Do you feel that way?

CF: War and violence keep winning out over non-violence, it seems. I do feel insignificant and unheard at times but maybe that's my fault for not trying harder to be heard.

SJ: What's your religion? Does that impact the poem?

CF: The fact that I'm Jewish impacts the poem inasmuch as I choose to pursue a spiritual path and I also wish to protect the rights of other New Yorkers who are pursuing a spiritual path, whatever it may be.

SJ: How did the Dickinson poem drive the poem?

CF: Linguistically, it got me started in approaching the poem by helping me play with the subway ad language. I processed the poem through the Dickinson sound combinations in my head.

SJ: Dane asks if you could change the subway sign what would you put on it?

CF: My poem, if that's not too egotistic.

I'd be specific. I might create a dialogue about what we are supposed to be looking for. Leaving it unspecified makes people unnecessarily suspicious. It shouldn't merely be left to a subway ad. People should already be involved in a dialogue about it.

SJ: Kelly says that perhaps the government is trying to palm off responsibility to ordinary people. How should we be specific? I guess just saying watch out for explosives and weapons and things that look as if they will directly lead to people getting hurt.

CF: Yes and certainly not telling people to single out people with unusual clothes, as they say.

Most importantly, we should consider that creating a climate of understanding and communication makes us safer.

POETRY IN RESPONSE TO CLIFF FYMAN

Riff on a sign

By HOLLY DELANEY-WADE

Sign
Schmign

Do we yield
or should we stop?
Judgment calls
and says do not
pass go
Do not

Collect
200

Now
What?

There is danger
in men working
or not working.
And in the blasting zone ahead where we need to
slow down and perhaps merge to the
a. left
b. middle
c. right

WHERE
ARE
YOU?

The Slogan

by LAURA CAMERLENGO

Have it your way,
Because you're worth it.
Live your own life,

Love your style,
Make it happen!

PUSH PUSH PUSH
Consume. Spew. Consume.

Think different.
Think outside the bun.
Don't leave home without it!
Be the champagne of ginger ales!
Are you lovin' it?

PUSH PUSH PUSH
Consume. Spew. Consume.

What this commercial is trying to sell you won't make your breath any sweeter,
Your clothes any whiter,
Or your acid indigestion any better.

It'll just make you more human.

CLIFF
by Poetry-Criticism Seminar

If you see people kneeling
Arms reaching to heaven,
Robes smudged with gobs
And streaks of bright red blood,

How do you say something?
If you see moi, if the time is right,
If you hear Josef Bacak's
Best of Beethoven album don't speak.

If you see a flux capacitor
See if it really exists.
Fiction makes time travel
A friend in our system.

by TERESA VREELAND

Personality, necessity, vanity, utility, expression or stupidity
Styles..smiles, creation, devastation, disoriented culture
Hobo, clutch, backpack or sac
Round, square, triangle, what's your angle
Suede, leather, pleather, denim, fur, alligator, sheep skin, crochet, canvas,
hippopotamus, preposterous
Versatile, reversible, irresistible
Straps, buttons, zipper, chains, rhinestones, studs
Embellishments to ordain, or just mundane
Singer- production- factory workers- minimum wage
Fraud advertising industry knockoffs
Gucci, Versace, Louis Vuitton, Coach, Chanel, Dior
Elegance, sophistication, rip off
Starving people near and far anguish over a meal
Suffocation, degradation, isolation
Bureaucracy, Aristocracy, Hypocrisy
Understanding perception, knowledge and behavior
To create meaningful, coherent rep