CHAPTER 7

Critical Thinking about Poetry and Fiction

The poet's job is not to tell you what happened, but what happens: not what did take place, but the kind of thing that always does take place.

(Northrop Frye, *The Educated Imagination*)

Reading literature is a time-honored way to develop critical thinking skills. Because poems and short stories are artistic, they resist easy analysis. Yet they are persuasive because they *move* you: literary writers create certain effects that cause you to think, to feel, and to consider ethical issues. These forms challenge you to question what you read. They require you to slow down and pay close attention to *meaning* (what is being expressed) and to *style* (how it is being expressed).

To read critically means to think while you read. The object is not how many facts you can remember but how well you can understand. Critical reading means

- *Analyzing*—noticing arguments and appeals, strategies of thinking, problems, insights
- *Questioning*—wondering why, how, what if, so what?
- *Inferring*—drawing conclusions from what is suggested or implied in a text
- *Interpreting*—explaining your own understanding of a text
- *Evaluating*—judging the value or worth of a poem, story, essay, any text

In sum, critical reading matures your ability to think.

READING AND WRITING ABOUT POETRY

Critical thinking helps you understand poetry. Let's begin with the following poem, "My Papa's Waltz":

My Papa's Waltz

Theodore Roethke

The whiskey on your breath
Could make a small boy dizzy;
But I hung on like death:
Such waltzing was not easy.

We romped until the pans
Slid from the kitchen shelf;
My mother's countenance
Could not unfrown itself.

The hand that held my wrist
Was battered on one knuckle;
At every step you missed
My right ear scraped a buckle.

You beat time on my head
With a palm caked hard by dirt,
Then waltzed me off to bed
Still clinging to your shirt.

ACTIVITY 1

In your notebook write a paragraph in which you support one of the following interpretations of this poem: (1) "My Papa's Waltz" concerns connection and love. (2) "My Papa's Waltz" concerns child abuse. (3) Offer another interpretation. Try to cite details from the poem to support your points.

Poetry—all art—challenges you *to feel and to think*. To think about what a poem means, you need to pay attention to its words. Usually there is more than one way to interpret a poem. An interpretation relies not directly on what a poem says but on what it implies through its use of language. Critical thinkers should be able to explain their interpretations and base them on evidence from a text.

You don't need to know a lot about reading poetry to enjoy Roethke's poem. "My Papa's Waltz" is a favorite in American literature. The image of father, a little drunk, "waltzing" roughly with his child is easy to visualize. And mother's disapproving "countenance"—the look on her face that shows her feelings—that "Could not unfrown itself" is also easy to see. You may recall a childhood moment when your father's behavior with children caused your mother to frown.

Why does she frown? After all, father seems in good spirits. Maybe a little too good? She doesn't say it, but many mothers might think it: "Someone's going to get hurt." When drunk, father becomes unpredictable, a little rowdy. Then too, something is shared between father and child from which mother is excluded.

If you enjoy the poem, you might ask yourself questions about the way it's constructed. Why is the poem addressed to "you" for example? Why is it written in the past tense? Why does it contain words that rhyme? To understand the poem fully, you must see Papa, smell "the whiskey on [his] breath," enough to "make a small boy dizzy." The poet is telling you something—or rather the narrator in the poem ("I hung on") is—and you must imagine it in your mind if you are to understand the poem.

Whether you can see the images depends on your understanding of the language. Although Roethke's poem is not usually considered difficult (except perhaps for *countenance* in line 7), the poem can present problems of interpretation. Words like *whiskey*, *dizzy*, *death* may carry negative connotations, as do *hand that held my wrist*, *battered*, *scraped*, *beat time on my head*, *palm caked hard by dirt*. All these negative words or connotations of words seem to make the poem itself negative. But against the negative ideas, there are three key ideas, unfamiliar to many students: waltzing, romping, and beating time.

Suppose a student claims the poem concerns child abuse, the drunken father "beating" the child while the mother does nothing. In part, this interpretation is the result of media campaigns against child abuse, wife abuse, and drunkenness. The student's interpretation may be less her own understanding of the poem than an interpretation that fits what she has heard about "beating."

Is child abuse a good interpretation? Why isn't it sufficient for the student to say, "Well, that's the way I see it—that's *my* interpretation"? Although the student believes she has a good understanding of the poem, this reading could be the result of hurrying through it. The child abuse interpretation weakens when readers consider the positive connotations in the poem.

The key word is *beat* in line 13. That word can mean physical abuse, but here the context suggests something else: "You beat *time*." A waltz is a formal dance, requiring much twirling in circles—dancers must move in time to the music. The other word that might lead a reader to infer child abuse is *battered* in line 10. Yet it isn't the child but the adult who is "battered on one knuckle." (Well, maybe his knuckle got battered from beating the child? Possibly, but that requires you to make an assumption based on the interpretation you are trying to defend.)

When you interpret a poem, your job is to make a point and to support it with specific evidence from the poem—examples of words, details, lines. If you believe the poem is about child abuse or about love or something else, you need to defend this view by citing and analyzing parts of the poem that show this. But keep in mind that

poems, being works of art, tend to hold some mystery. Poems rarely contain clear topic sentences or thesis statements. Poems *suggest* meaning: you infer meaning from a poem, and a poem can hold various meanings, even contradictory ones. Your job is to think about and feel a poem, sorting out what it suggests to you.

Might "My Papa's Waltz" concern both love and fear? Might the speaker feel closely connected to his father in the waltz yet feel afraid too—afraid of the father's show of love, of his unsteady movements, of the mother's frown and fear, of his own complex feelings toward his father? When he holds on "like death," this could mean that he doesn't want to let go of his father physically or let go of his father's love. Thus, the way you interpret this poem depends on the details you cite to support your idea. A "simple" poem, "My Papa's Waltz" is more complex than many readers first think. This is true of most excellent poetry.

The Language of Poetry

Critical reading requires two people—the poet on one end and the reader on the other. Between them is the poem, made of language. But this is true of all reading. Why should poetry be different, harder? Why can't you skim through poetry the way you can skim through a newspaper? Think of champion skaters who do complex yet beautiful twirls—should you forbid them from doing anything extraordinary? Can you insist they stick to *plain* skating? Poets are artists of language. As a critical reader you should try to stay with them, try to appreciate and understand their efforts.

Many poems present images and music to help you feel and comprehend some strong emotion. Read, for example, the following poem. (If you don't understand it at first, that's okay, but don't give up on it—it has some surprises.)

A narrow Fellow in the Grass

Emily Dickinson

A narrow Fellow in the Grass
Occasionally rides—
You may have met Him—did you not
His notice sudden is—

The Grass divides as with a Comb—
A spotted shaft is seen—
And then it closes at your feet
And opens further on—

He likes a Boggy Acre
A floor too cool for Corn—
Yet when a Boy, and Barefoot—
I more than once at Noon

Have passed, I thought, a Whip lash
Unbraiding in the Sun
When stooping to secure it
It wrinkled, and was gone—

Several of Nature's People
I know, and they know me—
I feel for them a transport
Of Cordiality—

But never met this Fellow
Attended, or alone
Without a tighter breathing
And Zero at the Bone—

How might you read this poem to appreciate it as well as to interpret it? In his classic book on poetry, *Sound and Sense*, Laurence Perrine offers three useful questions to help critical thinkers: (1) Who is the speaker and what is the occasion of the poem? (2) What is the poet's central purpose? (3) How does the poet achieve this purpose?

In "A narrow Fellow in the Grass" Emily Dickinson refers to the speaker as a boy: "Yet when a Boy, and Barefoot—." Poets often create the speaker of their poems; you shouldn't assume the poet is the speaker. The speaker of this poem may be a man who looks back at being a boy and mistaking a creature as being a "Whip lash." The occasion? The speaker tells about noticing a certain creature of nature.

What is Dickinson's central purpose in the poem? Although she never uses the word *snake*, you can infer from Dickinson's images and details that this poem concerns a snake: "narrow Fellow," "spotted shaft," "a Whip lash / Unbraiding in the Sun." The speaker seems in awe of snakes: they are wonderful creatures yet stir great fear in the speaker and in most people. Dickinson's central purpose may be to capture this contradictory feeling of awe and fear—and to help readers feel this same way.

How does Dickinson achieve this purpose? This third question involves analyzing how a poet uses language. You could argue that Dickinson achieves her purpose through using the second person pronoun *you*, vivid images, and figures of speech. She involves you as a reader by including you in the poem: "You may have met Him—did you not." Most of us have met snakes unexpectedly. Her second stanza also involves the reader: "And then it closes at your feet / And opens further on" as if a snake in the grass has come near you but left you alone. But after the references to "you," the speaker refers to himself as "I." The poem focuses on the speaker's feelings and thoughts.

Dickinson's images of the snake are visual: "narrow Fellow," "spotted shaft," "a Whip lash / Unbraiding in the Sun." The snake "wrinkled, and was gone"; it seems supernatural. Her simile—"The Grass divides as with a Comb"—conveys the snake's

latent power. You can see grass dividing. The whiplash metaphor suggests the snap of a whip like a snakebite. These images create a rising fear in the poem. The speaker does not feel cordial with snakes.

You could analyze other aspects of Dickinson's language such as her unusual capitalization (is it for emphasis?), her unconventional punctuation (no periods, and why so many dashes—because they look like snakes?). If you did some research on Dickinson's poem and writing style, you could probably find answers to these questions.

To address the third question of how the poet achieves her purpose, you could also analyze the poem's persuasive appeals to logos, pathos, and ethos. She appeals to logos or reasoning by moving you to think about snakes and nature and your complex reactions. You may question whether other creatures are like "Nature's People" and whether humans are sometimes like snakes. Dickinson uses pathos by rousing emotions—you may feel awe at imagining a snake riding and dividing the grass; you may feel fear at imagining a whiplash moving and then "stooping to secure it." You may have felt cold fear—"a tighter breathing" at seeing a lone snake. Dickinson stirs feelings of awe and fear, enabling you to identify with the speaker. She also helps readers appreciate the ethos of the speaker. Highly observant and thoughtful, he seems to care about nature, even referring to creatures as "Nature's People." His frank admission of fear makes the speaker honest and credible. You can trust the speaker; you sense he is sharing a truth about snakes and nature with you. Indeed, you might conclude that Dickinson's appeals to the speaker's character and to your own feelings provoke you to think about snakes and your complex relationship with nature.

Elements of Poetry

Here is a brief introduction to some of the major elements of poetry, most of which also exist in stories and essays.

Diction

Diction means "word choice." To analyze a poem, you notice the poem's words and think about what the words do to create meanings and to appeal to your reason, emotion, and character.

Words have denotation and connotation. The *denotation* is the dictionary meaning of the word, what most people mean by it. *Home* denotes where a person lives when not working. *Connotation* is implied meanings and associations attached to a word. *Home* usually carries connotations of warmth and love. But *home* can carry negative connotations if it calls to mind physical or emotional abuse for somebody. In determining the meanings of poetry, you must be alert to both denotations and connotations of words. The way many readers view Roethke's line "You beat time on my head" depends on whether they consider "beat" as physical violence or making music.

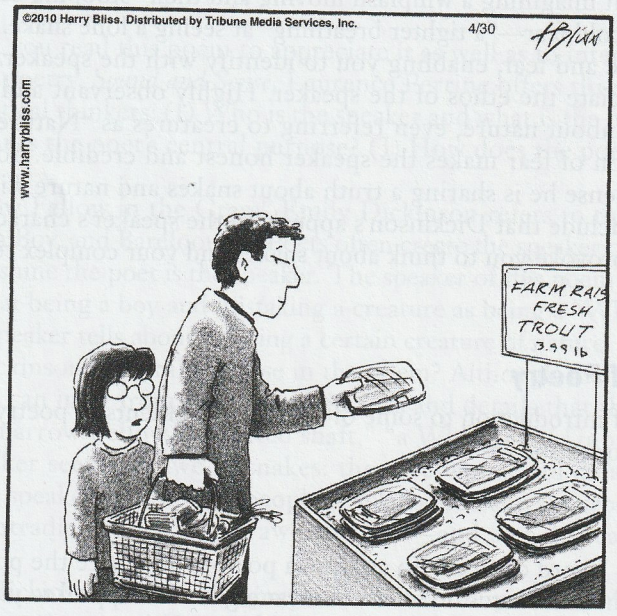
As with any form of writing you read carefully, when you see a word in a poem you don't know or understand, such as *countenance*, look it up in a dictionary after

you read the complete poem. This bit of research is necessary—and another hallmark of critical thinking. Certain words can unlock a poem for you when you reread it. This research and discovery of word meaning is part of the pleasure of reading poems—and stories and essays. Of course, if you need to look up many words in a poem to understand it, you may quickly feel overburdened. But most poems don't require such work.

Diction also refers to whether words are simple or complex, specific or general, concrete or abstract, literal or figurative. (See Interchapter 1.)

ACTIVITY 2

Critical thinkers notice words: in poems, in advertisements, in. . . . Look at this Bliss cartoon. What do you notice? What is the primary purpose of this cartoon?



"Is the Styrofoam 'farm-raised,' too?"

FIGURE 7.1 "Is the Styrofoam 'farm-raised,' too?" cartoon by Harry Bliss

Source: Bliss, Harry. "Is the Styrofoam 'farm-raised,' too?" Cartoon. *HarryBliss.com.* Web. 30 Apr. 2010. <www.harrybliss.com>

Imagery

An image is a sensory experience made of words—a detail based on one or more of your senses: sight, smell, sound, taste, touch. Through images a writer attempts to evoke some sensory event so you can imagine waltzing in a kitchen or witnessing a

snake in the grass. Not all poems contain images, but most do. Look at the images in "Root Cellar," another poem by Theodore Roethke:

Root Cellar

Theodore Roethke

Nothing would sleep in that cellar, dank as a ditch,
Bulbs broke out of boxes hunting for chinks in the dark,
Shoots dangled and drooped,
Lolling obscenely from mildewed crates,
Hung down long yellow evil necks, like tropical snakes.
And what a congress of stinks!—
Roots ripe as old bait,
Pulpy stems, rank, silo-rich,
Leaf-mold, manure, lime, piled against slippery planks.
Nothing would give up life:
Even the dirt kept breathing a small breath.

Figures of Speech: Metaphors, Similes, and Symbols

Metaphors and similes are kinds of comparisons, and poets use them often. A metaphor is an implied comparison without the word *as* or *like*. Consider the metaphors in this poem:

Metaphors

Sylvia Plath

I'm a riddle in nine syllables,
An elephant, a ponderous house,
A melon strolling on two tendrils,
O red fruit, ivory, fine timbers!
This loaf's big with its yeasty rising.
Money's new-minted in this fat purse.
I'm a means, a stage, a cow in calf.
I've eaten a bag of green apples,
Boarded the train there's no getting off.

To what do Plath's metaphors refer? (You will soon see.)

Similes are explicit comparisons containing the word *as* or *like*. Roethke describes shoots dangling "like tropical snakes" and "Roots ripe as old bait." Dickinson describes the grass dividing "as with a Comb."

Through metaphors and similes, poets join unrelated things to spark your imagination and consider new thoughts. (For more on metaphors and similes, see Interchapter 1.)

Symbols are visible objects that suggest or represent other things, often ideas. You know many common or conventional symbols: a dove suggests peace; a red rose suggests love; a cross suggests Christ; darkness suggests ignorance; light suggests knowledge. In Dickinson's poem "A narrow Fellow in the Grass," the snake might symbolize a loss of innocence or the presence of evil.

Tone

Tone is a writer's attitude toward the subject. Tone can be serious, humorous, playful, sad, loving, caring, angry, annoyed, and much more. How would you describe Roethke's tone in "Root Cellar"? Perhaps mock-serious or full of awe? After his earthy images he ends the poem by suggesting the cellar is incredibly full of life. The speaker seems in awe of nature in a confined space. How would you describe Plath's tone in "Metaphors"? She describes being fully pregnant, using extreme comparisons to help readers feel this condition. Her tone seems playful, yet the tone of the last line shifts into a serious realization: the speaker has "Boarded the train there's no getting off."

Speaker

Determining who speaks or narrates a poem can help you understand and interpret it. In "My Papa's Waltz" the speaker addresses his or her father. Although Theodore Roethke, a man, wrote the poem, the speaker could be a son or daughter; however, the poem contains the reference "Could make a small boy dizzy," which suggests the speaker is male. You shouldn't always assume that the speaker of a poem is the author of that poem, because poets often invent speakers—they adopt personas. In "Root Cellar," the speaker is an observer; you don't know what relationship he has to the cellar, although students doing research on Roethke would find that his family owned a greenhouse in Saginaw, Michigan. In "Metaphors," Sylvia Plath is an exasperated woman fully pregnant. Plath may have been that woman; she did have two children. But she does not announce that she is the woman—the speaker could be any woman close to bearing a child. Thus, analyzing the speaker of a poem helps you analyze the appeal to ethos in a poem—the character of the speaker.

Sound Patterns

Poems often contain sound patterns. In "Root Cellar" Roethke uses *alliteration*:

> "*d*ank as a *d*itch," "*B*ulbs *b*roke out of *b*oxes," "Shoots *d*angled and *d*rooped," "*R*oots *r*ipe as old bait"

Alliteration is the repetition of initial consonants of words. Roethke's thick alliteration suggests the thickness of vegetation in the cellar. The sound reinforces the sense or meaning of the poem.

In her snake poem Emily Dickinson uses *assonance*: the repetition of vowel sounds in words. The long *o*'s in Dickinson's poem echo the fear the speaker feels:

> But never met this Fellow,
> Attended, or alone
> Without a tighter breathing
> And Zero at the Bone—

Assonance often reinforces emotion in a poem.

What sound do you hear in this Dickinson line about a snake: "His notice sudden is—"? A hiss sound? Yes. Using words that echo the sound they denote is called *onomatopoeia*. The word "cricket" makes the sound of the insect; say the word a few times to hear it. But this sound device occurs much less often than alliteration and assonance. Sound patterns create the musical quality of poetry and much of the pleasure of listening to poetic language.

Structure

Considering a poem's physical structure can help you understand the poem. In "Metaphors," Plath cleverly structures her poem on the number *nine*: the title word has nine characters; each line contains nine syllables; the poem contains nine lines. This pattern is not readily apparent, but once you see it, it helps the poem make sense: a woman nine months pregnant is full-term; perhaps such a woman naturally thinks of nines. The number becomes a clue to the poem's meaning. "My Papa's Waltz" contains four-line stanzas, each with two rhymes such as "breath" / "death" and "dizzy" / "easy." These rhymes create a waltzing rhythm in the poem. This structure reinforces the interpretation that the speaker feels connected in a joyful dance with the father.

Poems usually contain stanzas. A stanza is a group of lines in a poem. A poem may contain one long stanza with no breaks, or it may contain several stanzas of same-numbered lines such as two-line stanzas, three- or four-line stanzas, or longer, depending on the poet's purpose. A poem about two lovers might work well with two-line stanzas to reinforce the idea of two. Yet many poems have irregular stanzas: two lines in one, five in another, three in the next. When this happens, the poet doesn't want to create the impression of order in a poem's structure.

Line Breaks

One of the most distinguishing features of poetry is that it contains line breaks. Poets deliberately choose where to end their lines to cause certain effects. They might end a line with a key word for emphasis or end a line in such a way that causes surprise. Consider these lines:

> When I called
> Dad mumbled out
> of sleep, asking
> "Who's there?"

The second line "Dad mumbled out" causes a little surprise because you might assume he mumbled out words, but he "mumbled out / of sleep." Poets might end a line to break a rhythm or to make a rhyme. A line in a poem can run on to the next line like turning a corner, or it can stop. Thus, when you read poems, noticing line breaks will help you appreciate and understand a poem more.

When you analyze poems, you may not need to consider all of these elements. Certain elements will stand out for you. You can focus on these. But an awareness of all the elements of poetry will help you understand and appreciate any artistic use of language.

READING NOTEBOOK

A reading notebook is especially worthwhile when you read literature. Your own notebook allows you to stop a few moments during or after your reading to reflect, to pull together your own thoughts about a poem or story, to make some record of how it affects you. Your personal response to the work of writers will help you clarify your own ideas and emotions. Reading and writing in this way connects you with an author.

Think of your notebook as your own approach to reading. As you respond to what you read, the notebook contains whatever you notice that catches your attention, puzzles you, or connects with you personally. When you begin more formal writing, you can draw upon your notebook reflections.

ACTIVITY 3

After you read the following poem, in your notebook write a page or so about what you notice in it.

Traveling through the Dark

William Stafford

Traveling through the dark I found a deer
dead on the edge of the Wilson River road.
It is usually best to roll them into the canyon:
that road is narrow; to swerve might make more dead.

By glow of tail-light I stumbled back of the car
and stood by the heap, a doe, a recent killing;
she had stiffened already, almost cold.
I dragged her off; she was huge in the belly.

My fingers touching her side brought me the reason—
her side was warm; her fawn lay there waiting,
alive, still, never to be born.
Beside that mountain road I hesitated.

The car aimed ahead its lowered parking lights;
under the hood purred the steady engine.
I stood in the glare of the warm exhaust turning red;
around our group I could hear the wilderness listen.

I thought hard for us all—my only swerving—
then pushed her over the edge into the river.

Here is an entry about Stafford's poem from Ryan's notebook:

Stafford describes a really sad event, and it makes me wonder: are we supposed to "enjoy" this poem? I read that Aristotle said tragedy was good for us—it purges the soul. If this is true, I wonder how Stafford's poem purges my soul.

At first "Traveling through the Dark" seems like a routine event, something we can easily deal with. The deer is dead on the road, but she's pregnant—there's a live fawn inside. If Stafford just wanted to make us happy, maybe he could have produced a hunting knife, opened the doe, and delivered the fawn. Maybe he could have driven the fawn into town, where the local vet would have cared for it. This would have made a happy Disney ending.

Instead though the speaker pushes the doe over the edge into the river. It's a shock ending; I didn't expect it. Why does it happen? There's no mention of a hunting knife in the poem. Even if the speaker could deliver the fawn, there's no guarantee any vet could be found who would care for it. A fawn requires a lot of attention, feeding several times a day. Without its mother, the fawn would likely die.

Perhaps Stafford is trying to shock us into thinking about a serious problem—civilization's intrusion into the deer's habitat. The speaker tells us this is not the first deer killed on this road: "It is usually best to roll them into the canyon." This suggests he has done this before or knows about it. As cities expand in urban sprawl, what happens to the creatures of the wilderness? What happens to *us*?

The speaker "hesitates" but at last decides what must be done. I wonder what I would have done in the same situation.

The more I think about this poem, the more questions come to mind. If the doe had not been "huge in the belly," would I respond differently? Suppose the deer had been a stag? And does it make a difference whether the speaker is male or female?

Do I feel purged? I don't know. But I do feel as if I just had this experience with the deer on the road.

I do notice some neat details in the poem. The image "By glow of tail-light"—perhaps it suggests blood. Maybe it's a kind of foreshadowing too. I like how the speaker "stumbled," not sure of what to do. This seems honest—I'd stumble. I really feel emotionally caught up in the third stanza. I can imagine my fingers touching the deer—"her side was warm." I like too how the poem builds in tension and how Stafford gives the car human qualities—"The car aimed ahead its lowered parking lights." And the engine "purred" like an animal. He refers to the deer and fawn and car and himself as "our group." They are all united in this awful and somehow precious moment. How can "the wilderness listen"? Maybe it can—maybe trees and hidden animals listen when there's tragedy—as if they care. I really like this suggestion.

I think maybe this is what Stafford wants us as readers to do—to care too. Maybe his poem helped purge me of indifference. Interesting.

Writing Assignment: An Essay about a Poem

Explore—analyze and evaluate—a poem: state a thesis about the poem and defend it. You may discover that after you write about a poem, you will understand and appreciate it much more. ■

Choose a poem you like a lot or that intrigues or puzzles you. Your job is to look for clues that show a writer's intended effects—this will help you analyze and evaluate how the poem works. After the following guidelines and a student's essay about a poem, you will find "Poems to Consider for Writing an Essay."

GUIDELINES FOR WRITING AN ESSAY ABOUT A POEM

1. Analyze and evaluate a poem by addressing these three questions:

   Who is the speaker and what is the occasion? Is the speaker someone different from the poet? If so, how? The occasion refers to when and where the poem takes place, as far as you can tell.

   What is the central purpose of the poem? What do you think the poet is trying to do in the poem—to express some emotion or truth, to describe a scene so vividly you never forget it, to help you appreciate what you have . . . ?

Continued . . .

By what means does the poet achieve this purpose? What does the poet do with elements of poetry: diction, imagery, figures of speech, tone, speaker, sound, structure, or line breaks? Focus on at least three elements of poetry. You may also analyze how the poem appeals to logos, pathos, and ethos. Analyze whatever stands out to you that the poet does to achieve his or her purpose.

2. Before you write your rough draft, type the poem you want to analyze, double-spaced. This will help you notice details about the poem. Proofread carefully against the original to catch any errors. Also, on the right margin, number the lines by 5s: 5, 10, 15, and so on. You will need to refer to line numbers when you quote from the poem in your essay.
3. Annotate the poem you typed—write notes on it. In the margins or between the lines write down anything you notice, feel, or think about. Draw arrows or question marks or stars—use whatever system you want to interact with the poem. Annotation helps you see more into the poem to find connections and ideas to write about. As you annotate, ask yourself questions: Why this word? Why this image? Why this structure? Why do I feel this way here in the poem? and so on.
4. Write a rough draft, following this format for your essay:

   A. *Title:* Give readers an idea about the poem you will analyze, and try to arouse interest. Which of these titles is more effective?

   Kindness in the "Blueblack Cold" or An Analysis of a Poem

   B. *Introduction:* Draw readers into your essay. Identify the author and the poem you will analyze. Then state a carefully worded thesis—your main idea—as the last sentence of your introduction.

   C. *Body:* Defend and demonstrate your thesis.

      1. Present a brief summary of the poem you will analyze, using your own language. If you quote from the poem, quote sparingly. Within your summary answer question one: Who is the speaker and what is the occasion? Use present tense in your summary.
      2. Proceed into your analysis, answering questions two and three: What is the central purpose of the poem, and by what means does the poet achieve this purpose? Use brief quotations—and a long quotation or two if appropriate—for supporting evidence. Cite line numbers after quoting from the poem. The body section will likely be at least three or more paragraphs. Use present tense: "Stafford writes" rather than "Stafford wrote."

   D. *Conclusion:* Reassert and clarify your thesis, and briefly discuss the overall quality of the poem.

   E. *Work Cited:* Provide a complete Work Cited entry for the poem. This need not be on a separate page—below your conclusion space down four spaces and put

Continued . . .

the Work Cited entry there. In the forthcoming "Poems to Consider for Writing an Essay," source information is provided for you to use. (For more information on Works Cited, see Chapter 11.)

F. *A Typed Copy of the Poem:* This should be a clean and accurate copy of the poem you analyze, with line numbers indicated on the right margin. Option: Present the poem toward the beginning of your essay.

5. Your essay should be two to four pages. Consider your audience for this paper to be your fellow classmates and instructor.

How to Quote from a Poem

You can quote a word, a phrase, or a stanza—it depends on your purpose. According to the MLA style of documentation, if you quote part or all of a single line from a poem, put it in quotation marks within your text.

> Stafford gives the car animal-like qualities such as "under the hood purred the steady engine" (14).

You may also incorporate two or three lines within your text, using a slash with a space on each side (/) to indicate line breaks:

> Stafford's speaker expresses his dilemma in the poem's last lines: "I thought hard for us all—my only swerving— / then pushed her over the edge into the river" (17–18).

The numbers at the end of the quotes refer to the line numbers in the poem, not page numbers. You should use line numbers when you quote.

Quotations of more than three lines should be treated like a long quote of prose: indent each line ten spaces (two tabs) from the left margin and double-space between lines, adding no quotation marks that do not appear in the original.

Student Essay Exploring a Poem

What follows is a poem, "Those Winter Sundays," and a student's analysis and evaluation of it that serves as a model on how to write about a poem.

Those Winter Sundays

Robert Hayden

Sundays too my father got up early
and put his clothes on in the blueblack cold,
then with cracked hands that ached
from labor in the weekday weather made
banked fires blaze. No one ever thanked him.

I'd wake and hear the cold splintering, breaking.
When the rooms were warm, he'd call,
and slowly I would rise and dress,
fearing the chronic angers of that house,

speaking indifferently to him,
who had driven out the cold
and polished my good shoes as well.
What did I know, what did I know
of love's austere and lonely offices?

Robert Hayden grew up in a Detroit ghetto called Paradise Valley. At eighteen months, he was given to next-door neighbors William and Sue Ellen Hayden, who raised him. William "Pa" Hayden is immortalized in "Those Winter Sundays." Robert Hayden was the first African-American to be appointed "Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress"; this position was later called the Poet Laureate.

Kindness in the "Blueblack Cold"

Ryan Lampman

Have you ever felt regret for not thanking someone for the kindness he showed you? Robert Hayden's poem "Those Winter Sundays" concerns such regret. Through his careful diction, sound, and imagery, Hayden helps readers feel a mix of regret and gratitude.

"Those Winter Sundays" is told through first-person. Someone—it may be Hayden himself but doesn't need to be—is telling about how his father woke early in their cold house and got a fire started to heat the place. The speaker is reflecting back on what happened those days. When the house was warm, the father called to wake him. The speaker says as he dressed he "fear[ed] the chronic angers of that house." The speaker spoke "indifferently to him," even knowing that his father had polished his "good shoes," suggesting that the family or the speaker would be going to church on those Sundays. The poem ends with the speaker questioning his own behavior—the way he reacted to his father's kindness.

To enable readers to feel and think about regret and gratitude, Robert Hayden uses carefully chosen words that suggest the character of the father. "Sundays too" (1) suggests that the father got up early other days as well in the winter to heat the house for his family. He didn't sleep in; he wasn't selfish. He "put his clothes on in the blueblack cold" (2). The word *blueblack* is surprising: it suggests that the morning was early dawn; Hayden joins the two words together into one and we can hear the *b* sounds of alliteration. The father was a laborer who worked outside. He had "cracked hands that ached / from labor in the weekday weather" (3–4). His life was not easy. But he "made / banked fires blaze" (4–5). Hayden's word choice in this first stanza holds sounds that echo: the hard rhymes of *black* and *cracked* (2–3), more *b*

sounds of alliteration in *banked* and *blaze*, and long *a* sounds of assonance in *ached* (3), *made* (4) and *blazed* (5). All these sounds help weave the poem's feeling and meaning together. The first stanza ends with a powerful statement: "No one ever thanked him" (5)—not only the speaker of the poem, but no one else in the family.

How cold is *cold*? The second stanza says the speaker could "hear the cold splintering, breaking" (6). These images suggest the house was cold as ice. The father didn't call until "the rooms were warm" (7). He demonstrates his love this way. When the speaker says he "fear[ed] the chronic angers of that house" (9), we don't know what he means exactly. The father doesn't seem angry in his early morning kindness. Perhaps the speaker's parents fought, or there were siblings who fought. The poem doesn't give details about "the chronic angers." But these words suggest the family was not happy.

The third stanza expresses the speaker's regret for "speaking indifferently to him, / who had driven out the cold / and polished my good shoes as well" (10–12). Why was the speaker so indifferent? Why didn't he thank his father? These questions stir personal questions for readers as well. Why have we been indifferent at times to the kindness given to us? Why have we not thanked others for their sacrifice?

The last two lines deepen the speaker's regret and dawning awareness. His repetition of "What did I know" resonates with the long *o* sounds in *know*. The long *o* is an emotional sound, like a cry of regret, "Oh, why didn't I thank him?" The long *o* in *lonely* carries this sound too. The last line, however, complicates yet enriches the poem with the word *austere*: "love's austere and lonely offices" (14). *Webster's New World Dictionary* defines *austere* as "showing strict self-discipline and self-denial." This meaning clearly applies to the selfless father; he certainly possessed "strict self-discipline and self-denial." But why does Hayden end with the word *offices*? Although we don't usually use the word this way, *Webster's New World* says it means "something performed or intended to be performed for another" and "a function or duty assigned to someone, esp, as an essential part of his work or position." The job of being a loving parent involves performing kind, good acts for children, such as heating up the house and cleaning their shoes for church.

This poem has persuasive appeals. In terms of logos, the poem helps us think about kindness and those times we have taken it for granted. It helps us think about regret: if we could only thank those people now who were so kind to us. Perhaps the speaker's father has died; he can no longer thank him. In terms of pathos, the poem helps us feel the speaker's sorrow for "speaking indifferently" (10) to his father. It can help us feel sorrow for not thanking someone who sacrificed for us. It's a useful sorrow if it can help us be grateful and express gratitude now or in the future. In terms of ethos, the poem showcases the character of a loving father who generated warmth in the house through his literal and symbolic actions. The man was trustworthy and credible. The family could count on him. The poem also suggests the character of the speaker: he is very human in being a selfish child and taking his father's kindness for granted. But the poem's tone suggests that the speaker is sorry for this and wishes he could have expressed his loving thanks to his father.

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Hayden, Rob
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POEMS TO

The Sum

Mary Oliver

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Tell me, what
Doesn't every
Tell me, what
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*Mary Oliver, w
most celebrated
people.*

One of the purposes of poetry is to humanize us: to help us see ourselves and how we might be better. Robert Hayden's poem "Those Winter Sundays" achieves this noble purpose. His careful use of words, sounds, and images helps us feel both regret and gratitude. For this, we can thank him.

Work Cited

Hayden, Robert. "Those Winter Sundays." *Angle of Ascent: New and Selected Poems.* New York: Liveright, 1975. 113. Print.

POEMS TO CONSIDER FOR WRITING AN ESSAY

The Summer Day

Mary Oliver

Who made the world?
Who made the swan, and the black bear?
Who made the grasshopper?
This grasshopper, I mean—
the one who has flung herself out of the grass,
the one who is eating sugar out of my hand,
who is moving her jaws back and forth instead of up and down—
who is gazing around with her enormous and complicated eyes.
Now she lifts her pale forearms and thoroughly washes her face.
Now she snaps her wings open, and floats away.
I don't know exactly what a prayer is.
I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down
into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,
how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,
which is what I have been doing all day.
Tell me, what else should I have done?
Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?
Tell me, what is it you plan to do
with your one wild and precious life?

Mary Oliver, winner of the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry and the National Book Award, is one of the most celebrated poets in America. Her poems often express interconnections between nature and people.

Source: Oliver, Mary. "The Summer Day." *New and Selected Poems.* Boston: Beacon Press, 1992. 94. Print.

Splitting an Order

Ted Kooser

I like to watch an old man cutting a sandwich in half,
maybe an ordinary cold roast beef on whole wheat bread,
no pickles or onion, keeping his shaky hands steady
by placing his forearms firm on the edge of the table
and using both hands, the left to hold the sandwich in place,
and the right to cut it surely, corner to corner,
observing his progress through glasses that moments before
he wiped with his napkin, and then to see him lift half
onto the extra plate that he asked the server to bring,
and then to wait, offering the plate to his wife
while she slowly unrolls her napkin and places her spoon,
her knife and her fork in their proper places,
then smoothes the starched white napkin over her knees
and meets his eyes and holds out both old hands to him.

Ted Kooser worked as an insurance executive for many years before becoming an English professor at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln. His poetry is known for showing the extraordinary in ordinary things. Kooser won the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 2005 and was our country's Poet Laureate from 2004 to 2006.

Source: Kooser, Ted. "Splitting an Order." *Valentines.* Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2008. 37. Print.

Heaven, 1963

Kim Noriega

It's my favorite photo–
captioned, "Daddy and His Sweetheart."
It's in black and white,
it's before Pabst Blue Ribbon,
before his tongue became a knife
that made my mother bleed,
and before he blackened my eye
the time he thought I meant to end my life.

He's standing in our yard on Porter Road
beneath the old chestnut tree.
He's wearing sunglasses,

a light cotton shirt,
and a dreamy expression.

He's twenty-seven.
I'm two.
My hair, still baby curls,
is being tossed by a gentle breeze.
I'm fast asleep in his arms.

Kim Noriega lives in Southern California and teaches poetry to adults and teens in recovery homes and public libraries. She facilitates family literacy programs for low-literate adults with small children. Her first book of poems Name Me *was published in 2010.*

Source: Noriega, Kim. "Heaven, 1963." *Blue Arc West: An Anthology of California Poets.* Eds. Paul Suntup, Dima Hilal, and Mindy Nettifee. Huntington Beach, CA: Tebot Bach, 2006. 117. Print.

Vocations Club

Paula Sergi

We met on Tuesdays after school
with Sister Mary Agnes,
the two Mary Lous, Julie, Kay and me
to learn about being nuns.
The convent sounded good;
a room of my own, a single bed,
time to think and pray, no fighting
over what we'd watch—Bonanza versus Dragnet,
or who would get the couch.
I dug those crazy nun outfits, and hated hand-me-downs
with too long sleeves and too tight waists.
I'd take the smell of polished wood and incense
over burnt grilled cheese and sour milk.
I'd have a good job, teaching kids
and all the chalk I'd want,
long, unbroken pieces that echoed off the board,
all eyes on me as I'd tap directions,
conducting my classroom all day.
People, I'd begin, today we're talking about . . .
whatever I want to!
Nuns got great rosaries with fancy beads
and lots of gifts at Christmas.
And the solitude of celibacy sounded pretty good,

better than worrying about French kissing
like my sister, better than pining for men,
like mom, whose men left anyway.

Paula Sergi is co-editor of Boomer Girls: Poems by Women from the Baby Boom Generation, *University of Iowa Press, 1999. She lives in Wisconsin. One of her interests is the intersect of science and poetry, informed by her BS in nursing and experience as a nurse.*

Source: Sergi, Paula. "Vocations Club." *Family Business.* Georgetown, KY: Finishing Line Press, 2005. 7. Print.

Work Boots: Still Life

Jim Daniels

Next to the screen door
work boots dry in the sun.
Salt lines map the leather
and the laces droop
like the arms of a new-hire
waiting to punch out.
The shoe hangs open like the sigh
of someone too tired to speak
a mouth that can almost breathe.
A tear in the leather reveals
a shiny steel toe
a glimpse of the promise of safety
the promise of steel and the years to come.

From the Detroit area, Jim Daniels worked in factories during summer breaks from college. Many of his poems concern the lives of workers, including his father, in automobile factories. His books of poems include Punching Out, *M-80, and* Night with Drive-by Shooting Stars. *He directs the creative writing program at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburg.*

Source: Daniels, Jim. "Work Boots: Still Life." *Show and Tell: New and Selected Poems.* Madison, WI: U. of Wisconsin Press, 2003: 22. Print.

May

Bruce Weigl

I wanted to stay with my dog
when they did her in
I told the young veterinarian
who wasn't surprised.

Shivering on the chrome table,
she did not raise her eyes to me when I came in.
Something was resolved in her.
Some darkness exchanged for the pain.
There were a few more words
about the size of her tumor and her age,
and how we wanted to stop her suffering,
or our own, or stop all suffering
from happening before us
and then the nurse shaved May's skinny leg
with those black clippers;
she passed the needle to the doctor
and for once I knew what to do
and held her head against mine.
I cleaved to that smell
and lied into her ear
that it would be all right.
The veterinarian, whom I'd fought
about when to do this thing
said through tears
that it would take only a few minutes
as if that were not a long time
but there was no cry or growl,
only the weight of her in my arms,
and then on the world.

Bruce Weigl served in Vietnam for two years and received the Bronze Star. In The Circle of Hanh: A Memoir, *he writes, "The war took away my life and gave me poetry in return." He was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize in 1988 for his collection of poems* Song of Napalm. *He is a professor of English at Lorain County Community College in Ohio.*

Source: Weigl, Bruce. "May." *What Saves Us.* Evanston: Northwestern U. Press, 1994. 57. Print.

Upon Seeing an Ultrasound Photo of an Unborn Child

Thomas Lux

Tadpole, it's not time yet to nag you
about college (though I have some thoughts
on that), baseball (ditto), or abstract
principles. Enjoy your delicious,

soupy womb-warmth, do some rolls and saults
(it'll be too crowded soon), delight in your early
dreams—which no one will attempt to analyze.
For now: may your toes blossom, your fingers
lengthen, your sexual organs grow (too soon
to tell which yet) sensitive, your teeth
form their buds in their forming jawbone, your already
booming heart expand (literally
now, metaphorically later); O your spine,
eyebrows, nape, knees, fibulae,
lungs, lips . . . But your soul,
dear child: I don't see it here, when
does that come in, whence? Perhaps God,
and your mother, and even I—we'll all contribute
and you'll learn yourself to coax it
from wherever: your soul, which holds your bones
together and lets you live
on earth. —Fingerling, sidecar, nubbin,
I'm waiting, it's me, Dad,
I'm out here. You already know
where Mom is. I'll see you more directly
upon arrival. You'll recognize
me—I'll be the tall-seeming, delighted
blond guy, and I'll have
your nose.

Thomas Lux has been teaching and writing since the early 1970s. He has received many awards for his poetry. But he says writing poems "is not something one chooses to do. . . . I do it because I love to do it and I don't have any choice. If I don't write, I feel empty and lost. . . . There is something about the right combination of metaphor or image connected to the business of being alive that only poems can do" (Poetryfoundation.org).

Source: Lux, Thomas. "Upon Seeing an Ultrasound Photo of an Unborn Child." *New and Selected Poems of Thomas Lux: 1975–1995*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1997. 113. Print.

Red Roses

Anne Sexton

Tommy is three and when he's bad
his mother dances with him.
She puts on the record

"Red Roses for a Blue Lady"
and throws him across the room.
Mind you,
she never laid a hand on him,
only the wall laid a hand on him.
He gets red roses in different places,
the head, that time he was as sleepy as a river,
the back, that time he was a broken scarecrow,
the arm like a diamond had bitten it,
the leg, twisted like a licorice stick,
all the dance they did together,
Blue Lady and Tommy.
You fell, she said, just remember you fell.
I fell, is all he told the doctors
in the big hospital. A nice lady came
and asked him questions but because
he didn't want to be sent away he said, I fell.
He never said anything else although he could talk fine.
He never told about the music
or how she'd sing and shout
holding him up and throwing him.

He pretends he is her ball.
He tries to fold up and bounce
but he squashes like fruit.
For he loves Blue Lady and the spots
of red red roses he gives her.

Anne Sexton (1928–1974) wrote powerful poetry during her life. She often wrote about emotional extremes. Among her books of poems are All My Pretty Ones *(1962),* Transformations *(1971), and 45 Mercy Street (1976).*

Source: Sexton, Anne. "Red Roses." *Anne Sexton: The Complete Poems.* Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981. 492–93. Print.

Mother to Son

Langston Hughes

Well, son, I'll tell you:
Life for me ain't been no crystal stair.
It's had tacks in it,

And splinters,
And boards torn up,
And places with no carpet on the floor—
Bare.
But all the time
I'se been a-climbin' on,
And reachin' landin's,
And turnin' corners,
And sometimes goin' in the dark
Where there ain't been no light.
So boy, don't you turn back.
Don't you set down on the steps
'Cause you finds it's kinder hard.
Don't you fall now—
For I'se still goin', honey,
I'se still climbin',
And life for me ain't been no crystal stair.

Langston Hughes (1902–1967), a major poet during the Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s, often wrote about poor black workers. His poems, he wrote, concern "people up today and down tomorrow, working this week and fired the next, beaten and baffled, but determined not to be wholly beaten" (poetryfoundation.org).

Source: Hughes, Langston. "Mother to Son." *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes.* Ed. Arnold Rampersad. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997. 30. Print.

Famous

Naomi Shihab Nye

The river is famous to the fish.

The loud voice is famous to silence,
which knew it would inherit the earth
before anybody said so.

The cat sleeping on the fence is famous to the birds
watching him from the birdhouse.

The tear is famous, briefly, to the cheek.

The idea you carry close to your bosom
is famous to your bosom.

The boot is famous to the earth,
more famous than the dress shoe,
which is famous only to floors.

The bent photograph is famous to the one who carries it
and not at all famous to the one who is pictured.

I want to be famous to shuffling men
who smile while crossing streets,
sticky children in grocery lines,
famous as the one who smiled back.

I want to be famous in the way a pulley is famous,
or a buttonhole, not because it did anything spectacular,
but because it never forgot what it could do.

Naomi Shihab Nye was born to an American mother and a Palestinian father. She lives in San Antonio, Texas. Known mostly for her poetry that celebrates humanity, she also writes children's books and essays. Her books include A Maze Me: Poems for Girls *(2005),* 19 Varieties of Gazelle: Poems of the Middle East *(2002), and* Habibi *(a novel for teens, 1999).*

Source: Nye, Naomi Shihab. "Famous." *Words under the Words.* Portland, OR: Far Corner Books, 1995: 80. Print.

Note: If you'd prefer to analyze a poem not in this book, please ask your instructor for permission. It's important to choose a poem you enjoy and that intrigues you in some way.

READING AND WRITING ABOUT FICTION

A story is good when you continue to see more and more in it, and when it continues to escape you. In fiction two and two is always more than four.

(Flannery O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners*)

Short stories and novels contain an artistic use of language—most of the same elements of poetry presented in the previous section: diction, imagery, figures of speech, tone, speaker, sound patterns, and structure. Fiction, however, isn't usually as musical as poetry because it doesn't employ stanzas and line breaks, which emphasize sound patterns more than paragraphs do. Like meaning in poetry, meaning in fiction is suggested, not readily explained. Readers infer meanings from a story based on what characters do, say, and think—and on connotations, details and images a writer uses.

Like poetry, serious or literary fiction requires a slower and more careful kind of reading than skimming through a newspaper. Such deliberate reading carries rewards: moments of entertainment and enlightenment.

And splinters,
And boards torn up,
And places with no carpet on the floor—
Bare.
But all the time
I'se been a-climbin' on,
And reachin' landin's,
And turnin' corners,
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ACTIVITY 4

Consider the following vignette—a short literary sketch. After you read it, reflect on it in your reading notebook. What do you notice? What do you like? What questions does it raise for you? What does the vignette mean to you?

Lights

Stuart Dybek

In summer, waiting for night, we'd pose against the afterglow on corners, watching traffic cruise through the neighborhood. Sometimes, a car would go by without its headlights on and we'd all yell, "Lights!"

"Lights!" we'd keep yelling until the beams flashed on. It was usually immediate—the driver honking back thanks, or flinching embarrassed behind the steering wheel, or gunning past, and we'd see his red taillights blink on.

But there were times—who knows why?—when drunk or high, stubborn, or simply lost in that glide to somewhere else, the driver just kept driving in the dark, and all down the block we'd hear yelling from doorways and storefronts, front steps, and other corners, voices winking on like fireflies: "Lights! Your *lights*! Hey, lights!"

This is a "light" little scene—not heavy, with no definite characters. But there is a conflict. Why does the speaker say that he or she and others yelled, "Lights!"? Although the answer is not stated, it is implied: a car without lights on at dusk poses a danger—a driver might not see clearly, and other people might not see a car clearly. A driver without lights on could hit a child; an elderly person could step in front of such a car. Thus, yelling "Lights!" is a community call for caution.

This vignette is taken from Stuart Dybek's book *The Coast of Chicago*, the city where he grew up. How would you describe Dybek's tone or attitude? He recalls this ritual with fondness: "we'd pose against the afterglow on corners, watching traffic cruise through the neighborhood." The words *pose* and *cruise* suggest a time of ease, of relaxation on these summer evenings. But if a car didn't respond by turning on its lights, the callers kept calling until a driver honked "back thanks" or "his red taillights" would "blink on." Dybek's images enable you to see, to hear, and to experience this setting and situation. The simile "voices winking on like fireflies" is surprising. It suggests that out of concern for others, the people's voices become lights.

ACTIVITY 5

Here is another vignette by Stuart Dybek. When you finish, write about it in your notebook. Try to reflect on what it means and on how Dybek uses language to create certain effects.

Maroon

Stuart Dybek

—for Anthony Dadaro, 1946–58

A boy is bouncing a ball off a brick wall after school. The bricks have been painted maroon a long time ago. Steady as a heartbeat the ball rebounds oblong, hums, sponges back round. A maroon Chevy goes by.

Nothing else. This street's deserted: a block-long abandoned factory, glass from the busted windows on the sidewalk mixed with brown glass from beer bottles, whiskey pints. Sometimes the alkies drink here. Not today.

Only the ball flying between sunlit hands and shadowed bricks and sparrows brawling in the dusty gutters. The entire street turning maroon in the shadow of the wall, even the birds, even the hands.

He stands waiting under a streetlight that's trying to flicker on. Three guys he's never seen in the neighborhood before, coming down the street, carrying crowbars.

What do you notice about Dybek's use of language? How does his language create his meaning? Here is an entry from Monica's notebook:

> I notice right away the color "maroon" and how it foreshadows blood and the violence that seem implicit in the vignette. The bricks of a wall are painted maroon and so is a car that drives by. Toward the end the "entire street" turns maroon-colored as dusk falls.
>
> I notice too that the dedication provides an important clue to the vignette's meaning: "For Anthony Dadaro, 1946–58." This boy lived only twelve years; he could be the boy in the vignette that the three "guys," not boys, victimize. Why they hurt the boy we readers don't know. Dybek doesn't give any details about their race or if the boy had offended the guys in some way. Perhaps the guys kill the boy for some kind of pleasure, as the boy plays catch for pleasure. But the boy is not a rubber ball.
>
> This is a sad vignette, just the opposite of Dybek's "Lights." There is no concern in this—except the tone. Dybek's tone seems concerned—his dedication suggests this. I like his ethos in this.
>
> I'm surprised by Dybek's ability to describe the scene. He notices so much yet uses so few words. I used to play catch with a rubber ball against a wall at school: "the ball rebounds oblong, hums, sponges back round." That's exactly what happens. But the boy doesn't bounce back, and we don't know why people sometimes commit such brutal acts.

ACTIVITY 6

Read the following from Anne Caston, the title piece from her book *Flying Out with the Wounded*. This vignette is a prose poem, a combination of prose and poetry: the author intentionally breaks lines and indents in certain ways. Then in your notebook, write about your reactions: what you notice, feel and think, what questions the piece stirs within you.

Flying Out with the Wounded

Anne Caston

When the lightning struck, trees blackened against a silver sky and the river bruised, the undersides of clouds wounding its surface. But this was not my work. My work, pressed into the dark hold of the chopper, was a drunk man—foul and fuming, restrained against his drunkenness, his abdomen packed with gauze to staunch the bleeding—and his head-on victims: a woman and a girl whose head had been bandaged to keep the brain intact.
The girl was dead.

We lifted off with our cargo. There were scant inches in which to crouch. Jack had to ride in front. I was airsick and praying that the snarl of blades overhead wouldn't snag in the electric night.

Somewhere between that stretch of sky and Birmingham, the man caught sight of the woman and girl. "Goddamn," he said, "Goddamn. *Gooks.*" And then, to me, "In 'Nam we used to throw 'em out, watch 'em splatter." He laughed and laughed to himself. The woman flinched. She turned her face from him, went back to stroking the girl's cheek. The girl's gaze was fixed. Still the woman was making the shushing sound. I leaned over the man. "Shut up," I said close to his ear so he would hear me over the noisy blades; "Shut up or I will push *you* out." He quieted then and I sat back to ride the airsickness in me out.

Can I tell you I liked thinking about pushing him out? Can I say I was imagining how easy it would be for me to roll the man out into the rumble of thunder and the whirring blades? I was.

But then he seized. He arched against his bonds. His eyes rolled back to white. I straddled the man; I called out for help. Jack grabbed the ambu bag and started the count. I placed my hands, palms down, against that spot two fingers' breadth from the tip of the sternum. I pushed: the man's wound gushed, wet and warm, against my thighs. The smell of blood thickened. I wanted to lift myself from him. Still I pushed the man's heart to respond. Still Jack counted. Still the ambu bag wheezed in and out.

> We worked like that the
> whole way in, and when we landed someone else took over.
> They lifted him away; I stepped out to catch a mouthful of
> wet, clean air, to drive the blood-drunk smell of him from my
> lungs. I looked down then and saw myself: bloodied, where I
> had straddled the man, as if I had just given birth.
>
> *Anne Caston, a former nurse, teaches English at the University of Alaska-Anchorage. Her first collection of poems,* Flying Out with the Wounded, *won the 1996 New York University Prize for Poetry. Her second book of poems is* Judah's Lion *(2009).*
>
> Source: Caston, Anne. "Flying Out with the Wounded." *Flying Out with the Wounded.* New York: NYU Press, 1997. 18–19. Print.

ACTIVITY 7

After writing in your notebook about Caston's vignette, write a brief essay (two pages) in which you analyze Caston's use of persuasive appeals. How does she appeal to logos, pathos, and ethos? Which of these appeals does she draw on most? State a thesis and defend it with reasons and specific evidence from the piece.

Elements of Fiction

Although fiction contains elements of poetic language, it contains other elements that characterize fiction as well as plays and movies. Essentially, a story involves *a main character* who experiences *a conflict* of some kind, minor or major. How the character reacts to the conflict moves the story forward. Usually the character undergoes a change of some kind during a story. This change creates much of the meaning in the story. For serious fiction, character and conflict must be credible and convincing—believable; otherwise, readers will not care what happens.

In Anne Caston's vignette, the speaker is an emergency medical technician. Her character is convincing because she battles to save the life of a drunk man who, in a head-on car accident, has injured a Vietnamese woman and killed her daughter. The major conflict is the speaker's contradictory desire to push the man out of the helicopter and to save his life.

Plot and Conflict

The plot is what happens in a story—the sequence of cause and effect events. The plot hinges on some conflict a main character finds him or herself in. A story may have a single conflict or several conflicts, even layers of conflict operating at the

same time. Usually a story's conflict rises in tension and becomes resolved or not resolved by the end. Keep in mind also that there are degrees of conflict: conflict can be dramatic and graphic as in Anne Caston's vignette. It can be more quiet, as in Dybek's "Lights."

Character

In analyzing serious fiction, you can evaluate whether characters are *round* (complex, contradictory, real) or *flat* (stereotypical, one-dimensional, artificial). For fiction to work well, the main character must be not only credible but also worth caring about, for you to keep paying close attention. Also, what characters say and what they wear reveal their personalities. If a character says, "I seen that movie before," you can infer the character may be poorly educated.

But "character" also refers to the ethos or morality of a person in a story. Is the person good, evil, or a mixture of both? Does the person do right, wrong, or both? In short, does the main character have *good character*?

Point of View

Who is telling the story? In fiction, the "narrator" is generally not the "author"—narrators are characters. Narrators can be

First person ("I" or "We"):	I yelled, "Lights!" We yelled, "Lights!"
Second person ("You"):	You yelled, "Lights!"
Third person ("He" or "She") ("They" or "It"):	He yelled, "Lights!" She yelled, "Lights!" They yelled, "Lights!"
Omniscient:	The narrator knows the thoughts and feelings of one, some, or all of the characters.

First person, says fiction writer Stuart Dybek, is by nature the most intimate point of view, capable of producing lovable characters such as Holden Caulfield or Huck Finn. First person encourages readers to identify with the main character, and to identify is to believe the story. A story needs to be both emotionally and physically credible. When details are specific, concrete (appealing to the senses), and precise, readers find it easier to participate in the story.

Setting

Setting is where the story takes place. It is where a conflict is set in motion. In Dybek's "Maroon" the setting is a rough city street that appears abandoned, where a boy plays catch with a rubber ball until three ominous guys approach. In "Flying Out with the Wounded" the story happens within a helicopter and outside the copter when it lands. A story may contain several different settings or scenes and different times of day or year. It may include flashbacks to the past and flash forwards to the future.

Moral Issues

Serious fiction deals with moral issues, questions of value. Dybek's vignettes concern caring about people not getting hurt. Caston's vignette concerns questions such as "Is it right to help a drunken man whose recklessness has caused irreparable harm?" As a nurse, the speaker is obligated to help; as a person, she wants to push the man out of the chopper. The way characters struggle to deal with moral issues is part of their conflict and a story's meaning.

Writing Assignment: An Essay about A Story

Explore—analyze and evaluate—a short story: state a thesis about the story and defend it. ■

Choose one of the following stories: "The Story of an Hour," "Popular Mechanics," "Shotgun Wedding," or "Pet Milk" to explore in an essay.

GUIDELINES FOR WRITING AN ESSAY ABOUT A STORY

1. Analyze and evaluate a story by addressing these three questions:

   Who is the narrator and what is the occasion? The occasion refers to when and where the story takes place, as far as you can tell.

   What is the central purpose of the story? What do you think the writer is trying to do and say in the story?

   By what means does the writer achieve this purpose? What does the writer do with elements of fiction such as plot and conflict, character, point of view, setting, and moral issues? What does the writer do with elements of language such as diction, imagery, figures of speech, and tone? Focus on at least three elements of fiction or language. You may also analyze how the story appeals to logos, pathos, and ethos. Analyze whatever stands out to you that the writer does to achieve his or her purpose.

2. Make a copy of the story and annotate it. Write notes on it in the margins or between the lines. Write down anything you notice, feel, or think about. As you annotate, ask yourself questions: Why is this character doing that? Why did the character say that? Why do I feel this way here in the story?
3. Write a rough draft, following this format for your essay:

   A. *Title:* Give readers an idea about the story you will analyze, and try to arouse interest.

Continued . . .

B. *Introduction:* Draw readers into your essay by engaging them somehow. Identify the author and the story you will analyze. Then state a carefully worded thesis—your main idea—as the last sentence of your introduction.

C. *Body:* Defend and demonstrate your thesis.

1. Present a brief summary of the story you will analyze, using your own language. Within your summary answer question one: Who is the narrator and what is the occasion? Use present tense in your summary.
2. Proceed into your analysis, answering questions two and three: What is the central purpose of the story, and by what means does the writer achieve this purpose? Use brief quotations—and a long quotation or two if appropriate—for supporting evidence. The body section will likely be at least three or more paragraphs. Use present tense: "Dybek writes" rather than "Dybek wrote."

D. *Conclusion:* Reassert and clarify your thesis, and briefly discuss the overall quality of the story.

E. *Work Cited:* Provide a complete Work Cited entry for the story. This need not be on a separate page—below your conclusion space down four spaces and put the Work Cited entry there. At the end of each story, source information is provided for you to use. (For more information on Works Cited, see Chapter 11.)

4. Your essay should be two and four pages. Consider your audience for this paper to be your fellow classmates and instructor.

Note on Quoting from a Story

To communicate clearly, you need to refer to specific details in the story itself. Use some quotations—brief or long—to provide supporting evidence for your points, to show what you mean. With fiction as with nonfiction, a long quote is four or more lines and should be set off ten spaces (two tabs) from the left margin and double-spaced. After each quote you use, cite the page number where you found the quote in parentheses.

STORIES TO CONSIDER FOR WRITING AN ESSAY

The Story of an Hour

Kate Chopin

Knowing that Mrs. Mallard was afflicted with heart trouble, great care was taken to break to her as gently as possible the news of her husband's death.

It was her sister Josephine who told her, in broken sentences; veiled hints that revealed in half concealing. Her husband's friend Richards was there, too, near her. It was he who had been in the newspaper office when intelligence of the railroad disaster

was received, with Brently Mallard's name leading the list of "killed." He had only taken the time to assure himself of its truth by a second telegram, and had hastened to forestall any less careful, less tender friend in bearing the sad message.

She did not hear the story as many women have heard the same, with a paralyzed inability to accept its significance. She wept at once, with sudden, wild abandonment, in her sister's arms. When the storm of grief had spent itself she went away to her room alone. She would have no one follow her.

There stood, facing the open window, a comfortable, roomy armchair. Into this she sank, pressed down by a physical exhaustion that haunted her body and seemed to reach into her soul.

She could see in the open square before her house the tops of trees that were all aquiver with the new spring life. The delicious breath of rain was in the air. In the street below a peddler was crying his wares. The notes of a distant song which someone was singing reached her faintly, and countless sparrows were twittering in the eaves.

There were patches of blue sky showing here and there through the clouds that had met and piled one above the other in the west facing her window.

She sat with her head thrown back upon the cushion of the chair, quite motionless, except when a sob came up into her throat and shook her, as a child who had cried itself to sleep continues to sob in its dreams.

She was young, with a fair, calm face, whose lines bespoke repression and even a certain strength. But now there was a dull stare in her eyes, whose gaze was fixed away off yonder on one of those patches of blue sky. It was not a glance of reflection, but rather indicated a suspension of intelligent thought.

There was something coming to her and she was waiting for it, fearfully. What was it? She did not know; it was too subtle and elusive to name. But she felt it, creeping out of the sky, reaching toward her through the sounds, the scents, the color that filled the air.

Now her bosom rose and fell tumultuously. She was beginning to recognize this thing that was approaching to possess her, and she was striving to beat it back with her will—as powerless as her two white slender hands would have been.

When she abandoned herself a little whispered word escaped her slightly parted lips. She said it over and over under her breath: "free, free, free!" The vacant stare and the look of terror that had followed it went from her eyes. They stayed keen and bright. Her pulses beat fast, and the coursing blood warmed and relaxed every inch of her body.

She did not stop to ask if it were or were not a monstrous joy that held her. A clear and exalted perception enabled her to dismiss the suggestion as trivial.

She knew that she would weep again when she saw the kind, tender hands folded in death; the face that had never looked save with love upon her, fixed and gray and dead. But she saw beyond that bitter moment a long procession of years to come that would belong to her absolutely. And she opened and spread her arms out to them in welcome.

There would be no one to live for her during those coming years; she would live for herself. There would be no powerful will bending hers in that blind persistence with which men and women believe they have a right to impose a private will upon a fellow-creature. A kind intention or a cruel intention made the act seem no less a crime as she looked upon it in that brief moment of illumination.

And yet she had loved him—sometimes. Often she had not. What did it matter! What could love, the unsolved mystery, count for in face of this possession of self-assertion which she suddenly recognized as the strongest impulse of her being!

"Free! Body and soul free!" she kept whispering.

Josephine was kneeling before the closed door with her lips to the keyhole, imploring for admission. "Louise, open the door! I beg; open the door—you will make yourself ill. What are you doing, Louise? For heaven's sake open the door."

"Go away. I am not making myself ill." No; she was drinking in a very elixir of life through that open window.

Her fancy was running riot along those days ahead of her. Spring days, and summer days, and all sorts of days that would be her own. She breathed a quick prayer that life might be long. It was only yesterday she had thought with a shudder that life might be long.

She arose at length and opened the door to her sister's importunities. There was a feverish triumph in her eyes, and she carried herself unwittingly like a goddess of Victory. She clasped her sister's waist, and together they descended the stairs. Richards stood waiting for them at the bottom.

Someone was opening the front door with a latchkey. It was Brently Mallard who entered, a little travel-stained, composedly carrying his grip-sack and umbrella. He had been far from the scene of the accident, and did not even know there had been one. He stood amazed at Josephine's piercing cry; at Richards' quick motion to screen him from the view of his wife.

But Richards was too late.

When the doctors came they said she had died of heart disease—of joy that kills.

Kate Chopin (1850–1904) wrote The Awakening, *considered a classic feminist novel, and nearly a hundred short stories in the 1890s. Most of her fiction is set in Louisiana and focuses on the lives of sensitive, intelligent women* (katechopin.org).

Source: Chopin, Kate. *The Complete Works of Kate Chopin.* Baton Rouge: Louisiana State U Press, 1969. 352–354. Print.

Popular Mechanics

Raymond Carver

Early that day the weather turned and the snow was melting into dirty water. Streaks of it ran down from the little shoulder-high window that faced the backyard. Cars slushed by on the street outside, where it was getting dark. But it was getting dark on the inside too.

He was in the bedroom pushing clothes into a suitcase when she came to the door.

I'm glad you're leaving! I'm glad you're leaving! she said. Do you hear?

He kept on putting his things into the suitcase.

Son of a bitch! I'm so glad you're leaving! She began to cry. You can't even look me in the face, can you?

He looked at her and she wiped her eyes and stared at him before turning and going back to the living room.

Bring that back, he said

Just get your things and get out, she said

He did not answer. He fastened the suitcase, put on his coat, looked around the bedroom before turning off the light. Then he went out to the living room.

She stood in the doorway of the little kitchen, holding the baby.

I want the baby, he said.

Are you crazy?

No, but I want the baby. I'll get someone to come by for his things.

You're not touching this baby, she said.

The baby had begun to cry and she uncovered the blanket from around his head.

Oh, oh, she said, looking at the baby.

He moved toward her.

For God's sake! she said. She took a step back into the kitchen.

I want the baby.

Get out of here!

She turned and tried to hold the baby over in a corner behind the stove.

But he came up. He reached across the stove and tightened his hands on the baby.

Let go of him, he said.

Get away, getaway! she cried.

The baby was red-faced and screaming. In the scuffle they knocked down a flowerpot that hung behind the stove.

He crowded her into the wall then, trying to break her grip. He held on to the baby and pushed with all his weight.

Let go of him, he said.

Don't, she said. You're hurting the baby, she said.

I'm not hurting the baby, he said.

The kitchen window gave no light. In the near-dark he worked on her fisted fingers with one hand and with the other hand he gripped the screaming baby up under an arm near the shoulder.

She felt her fingers being forced open. She felt the baby going from her.

No! she screamed just as her hands came loose.

She would have it, this baby. She grabbed for the baby's other arm. She caught the baby around the wrist and leaned back.

But he would not let go. He felt the baby slipping out of his hands and he pulled back very hard.

In this manner, the issue was decided.

Raymond Carver (1938–1988), born in Oregon, is best known for his short stories concerning the toll of alcoholism and breakups. His books include Will You Please Be Quiet, Please? *(1976) and* Where Water Comes Together with Other Water: Poems *(1986).*

Source: Carver, Raymond. "Popular Mechanics." *What We Talk about When We Talk about Love: Stories.* New York: Vintage, 1989. 123–126. Print.

Shotgun Wedding

Bonnie Jo Campbell

Clearly this groom is more accustomed to lugging hay bales and veal calves, but with those big hands he manages to lift my sister's veil and smooth it back prettily over her hair, revealing her face and shoulders. I feel vaguely shameful about this ritual undressing, though I myself have stripped naked in all sorts of places with men whom I've no intention of marrying. Now, as the groom bends toward my sister's face, the bought flowers vibrate in the vases, and my hands shake. My sister, who has a tiny waist and who is an honest-to-goodness virgin, absorbs the moment before the kiss and pulls all the energy from the room, leaving the rest of us feeling dull.

The softness of their kiss gives me the seasick feeling that I'm with my sister and the groom on the honeymoon bed. After all, I shared a room with her until I left for college. I look away, to the pastor who looms over this procedure with the gravity of a hangman, then up to the electric chandelier, which gleams motionless. No longer do I fear that my dress will come unzipped or that the brass fixture will fall and crack open my sister's skull; instead I fear that this kiss will not end, that time will freeze and abandon me in this orbit. My sister's eyes are closed, her lashes spread out over her cheeks. Even after they've opened again, her eyes remain in the sleep of that kiss as though covered with a milky effluent, something the fairies would make in their mouths and spit onto those they favor.

In the upholstered front-row pew, my parents' eyes seem covered with the milky substance as well. My mother dabs her face with a Kleenex; in the garden she wipes the sweat off her forehead with the bottom of her T-shirt. My father, who didn't even wear a suit to my aunt's funeral last year, is dressed like Fred Astaire and has got his legs crossed. The change in my parents frightens me more than walking on carpeting in three-inch heels, and I'm wishing that I had carried my own weedy bouquet of wild phlox or had neglected to shave my legs or had worn a necklace of stones, done anything that would make me feel more like myself. I'm letting my sister down by being sucked into her fairy tale. Someone should always remain vigilant.

My job now is to follow the bride and the groom down the aisle. My sister's gown is something out of a 1940s movie, sleeveless and crusted with embroidery, front and back—I wouldn't let her tell me what she paid for it. Her gloves extend past her elbows, to tiny biceps unbefitting a farm girl. Though we are not a touchy family, my father reaches out from the pew and squeezes my free hand with his calloused palm. He taught me to shoot, my father, by pressing his index finger over my own to squeeze the trigger the first time. As I shuffle behind the bride and groom, I let my father's hand drop and look away so he doesn't see that I've started to cry.

When my father taught me to shoot, I was ten. First I shot at a target placed against a side of the hill in the pasture, and then at raccoons who tried to get into the chicken house. My sister refused even to touch the shotgun; she did not want to be Annie Oakley or Laura on the prairie. She wanted to be Cinderella or Snow White, passive and pure at heart. Like the princess who couldn't bear the pea beneath the mattress, when my sister started her period, she spent three days in bed without

speaking—she had seen the health movies in school, but she had honestly not believed that her own body would betray her in this way. My father always worried about my sister not learning to shoot; he told my mom that a girl like her especially needed to be able to defend herself.

From now on she has her husband to defend her, I suppose. And who knows? Maybe the two of them will have one of those lives of enduring bliss you hear about on the radio. I remain six feet behind my sister so I don't step on her train, and I take the hand of the flower girl, my cousin's daughter, who has emptied the basket of rose petals and is now fidgeting at having to walk so slowly. Suddenly, in the first unchoreographed move of this ceremony, just before passing through the double doors beneath the " Exit" sign, my sister turns and looks back toward the altar. Had I anticipated that she would then look at me, I'd have straightened out my face and smiled, but she catches my eyes full of tears and my mouth set grimly in the memory of shooting my first raccoon dead outside the chicken house, of the shot picking its body up off the ground and slamming it against the barn wall.

My sister wears all kinds of waterproof mascara and eye shadow, so her eyes appear especially white and alert; but the fairy milk clears the instant her gaze meets mine, leaving the naked look of a girl in the water who can't swim. She stares at me for one second, two seconds. Why doesn't the groom notice my sister's distress? He should turn her around and kiss her hard, crushing those flowers in his pocket if necessary. Kiss her, I want to yell. Instead, I collect myself into a half-smile which does not fool her. There's nothing I can do except reach down and straighten her embroidered train which I have almost just stepped on. The flower girl bends and helps, grateful for something to do. Through the back of my head I feel my parents watching.

When I was thirteen, my sister was nine. That was one of the winters both my father and my mother worked at the Halko plant making automotive armrests and glove boxes on third shift, leaving the house at ten-thirty at night. Though the area is starting to get built up, our house then was a half-mile from the next neighbor; the police might take half an hour to get to us, so my father told me to sleep with the shotgun against the wall beside my bed. He placed it there before he left each night. "If you hear anyone outside, you get that gun," he had instructed me. "If anyone comes into this house without your permission, you blow 'em away, honey."

My sister always slept soundly—Sleeping Beauty, my mother called her because she was lost to our world for ten or twelve hours a night. I have never needed that much sleep, but I could read without disturbing her in the bed next to mine, or reorganize the shells and polished stones on the top of my dresser by shape or color or size. After my parents went to work, I sometimes got up and walked the floors of all the rooms, including what would have been my sister's room if she'd been willing to move into it. We'd cleared it out and painted it for her; she could have put up filmy curtains instead of living with the burlap ones Mom helped me make. Mom began to store boxes of our outgrown clothes in the room that my sister did not occupy, and eventually she put her sewing machine and ironing board back in.

One night just after Mom and Dad left for work, when the oil burner kicked off and left the house silent, I heard the crunching of driveway gravel, steps in a man's cadence, so that I thought it must be my father returning. I looked out from the

window in the landing and did not see his truck, but saw a tall stranger walking toward our porch, glancing side to side, his hands in his pockets. He wore a quilted, red-checked flannel shirt without a jacket though it was below freezing out. I descended the stairs and moved toward the front door as the man ascended to the porch, so that we approached one another, he with his laced-up workboots, and myself barefoot with the shotgun loaded and pointed forward, safety off. The man did not knock, but the doorknob turned halfway. I touched it to assure myself that my parents had locked the door on their way out. The brass conducted cold from outside. I stepped back and pointed the gun at the latch.

"Wait until an intruder's in the house," my father had said, "or else you'll have to drag him inside and tell the cops that's where you shot him." He had said this as if joking, but now I envisioned myself dragging that man's body across the threshold by one limp arm or a belt loop. My father had told me to shoot a man anywhere on the abdomen, because I couldn't miss at close range, and the twelve gauge at close range would tear a man apart. When I'd shot that first raccoon outside the chicken house its body turned inside out.

The man stood on the other side of the door, perhaps deciding which window to break, or deciding how much force it would take to destroy the front door hardware. It never occurred to me that the man might have come for warmth or merely to steal money or the television. My sister sleeping upstairs no longer seemed a regular flesh-and-blood girl, but had become a rare treasure like a unicorn or a living swan made of white gold, and it made sense that our house would be under siege.

The gun grew heavy against my shoulder, but the weight felt natural, and the metal of the barrel and the trigger gradually warmed to my body temperature. Whenever I'd actually pulled the trigger, I'd been bruised by the recoil; now I looked forward to that burst of pain again, the price I would pay for exploding this man's stomach or heart. One blast should take him down, but if he was still standing, I'd load and shoot again. After the first, there were four shots in the magazine, enough to kill a bull, or even a vampire. After I shot that raccoon, my father dug a hole and buried it right here; he said the other raccoons would smell it and stay away.

The man stepped to the side and looked in through the skinny single-paned window beside the door. Most likely he saw first the identifiable roundness of the end of the shotgun barrel, the size of a nickel, which I had moved to point straight at him. Then he cupped his hands against the glass and let his eyes adjust to the darkness, in which he gradually made out my face, my strawberry blond hair which has darkened in the years since, my freckles, my ray eyes. My face gave away nothing, and in the several seconds during which the man stared into my eyes, he might have seen his own self turned inside out.

His face seemed surprisingly delicate except for a day's growth of beard; his skin was pale and his eyes dark, quiet, and dilated. I had not expected an intruder to be beautiful. I let the gun slide forward slightly, so the tip of the barrel kissed the window, clinked against the glass like the turning of a key. The pretty gaze dissolved. His jaw fell loose. As the man's face disintegrated, I stood unearthly still, not even blinking, poised to fire. I felt no fear, standing in a flannel nightgown which was both too large and too short, whose pattern of galloping horses had faded, and whose frayed

ruffle moved back and forth across my legs, brushing the bare skin just below my knees. I felt no fear, though my legs were thin, hardly bigger than the barrel of the gun, and my arms were strained. I felt no fear at the prospect of shooting this man, of watching his body crumple, then dragging the corpse inside, quickly so the heat didn't escape from the house.

I held the gun up long after the man turned and walked down the steps and ran across our frozen lawn toward the road. His hands were still in his pockets, but he held his arms tight against his sides now. When he looked back over his shoulder at the house, he tripped over an apple tree stump my father had been meaning to dig out with the backhoe. He briefly lay prone before he took his hands out of his pockets to push himself up and continue to the road at a jog. The electricity in the air dissipated, but still I held that gun up, even after my arms began to shake, pointing it at the front door where now only the ghost of the man remained. The house air seemed dusty and suffocating. A screech owl cried brokenheartedly from the woods across the road. The furnace kicked on and kicked off twice before I lifted that gun off my shoulder and let my arms hang free. I would not sleep that night but would walk the rooms of the house until morning. Under my weight the floorboards creaked in a thousand places. I returned again and again to the room where my sister slept. Hour after hour, while I kept watch, her princess hair curled onto her pillow, and all night her long dark lashes rested against her cheeks, beneath eyes clenched firmly in dreams.

Bonnie Jo Campbell lives on a farm near Kalamazoo, Michigan. After earning a master's degree in mathematics, she started writing fiction. Her recent book of short stories American Salvage *was nominated for the National Book Award in 2009. She practices Kouburyo karate and also created a microbrew, Q Brew, to go with her novel* Q Road *(2002).*

Source: Campbell, Bonnie Jo. "Shotgun Wedding." *Women and Other Animals.* New York: Scribner, 2002. 56–61. Print.

Pet Milk

Stuart Dybek

Today I've been drinking instant coffee and Pet milk, and watching it snow. It's not that I enjoy the taste especially, but I like the way Pet milk swirls in the coffee. Actually, my favorite thing about Pet milk is what the can opener does to the top of the can. The can is unmistakable—compact, seamless looking, its very shape suggesting that it could condense milk without any trouble. The can opener bites in neatly, and the thick liquid spills from the triangular gouge with a different look and viscosity than milk. Pet milk isn't *real* milk. The color's off, to start with. There's almost something of the past about it, like old ivory. My grandmother always drank it in her coffee. When friends dropped over and sat around the kitchen table, my grandma would ask, "Do you take cream and sugar?" Pet milk was the cream.

There was a yellow plastic radio on her kitchen table, usually tuned to the polka station, though sometimes she'd miss it by half a notch and get the Greek station

instead, or the Spanish, or the Ukrainian. In Chicago, where we lived, all the incompatible states of Europe were pressed together down at the staticky right end of the dial. She didn't seem to notice, as long as she wasn't hearing English. The radio, turned low, played constantly. Its top was warped and turning amber on the side where the tubes were. I remember the sound of it on winter afternoons after school, as I sat by her table watching the Pet milk swirl and cloud in the steaming coffee, and noticing, outside her window, the sky doing the same thing above the railroad yard across the street.

And I remember, much later, seeing the same swirling sky in tiny liqueur glasses containing a drink called a King Alphonse: the crème de cacao rising like smoke in repeated explosions, blooming in kaleidoscopic clouds through the layer of heavy cream. This was in the Pilsen, a little Czech restaurant where my girlfriend, Kate, and I would go sometimes in the evening. It was the first year out of college for both of us, and we had astonished ourselves by finding real jobs—no more waitressing or pumping gas, the way we'd done in school. I was investigating credit references at a bank, and she was doing something slightly above the rank of typist for Hornblower & Weeks, the investment firm. My bank showed training films that emphasized the importance of suitable dress, good grooming, and personal neatness, even for employees like me, who worked at the switchboard in the basement. Her firm issued directives on appropriate attire—skirts, for instance, should cover the knees. She had lovely knees.

Kate and I would sometimes meet after work at the Pilsen, dressed in our proper business clothes and still feeling both a little self-conscious and glamorous, as if we were impostors wearing disguises. The place had small, round oak tables, and we'd sit in a corner under a painting called "The Street Musicians of Prague" and trade future plans as if they were escape routes. She talked of going to grad school in Europe; I wanted to apply to the Peace Corps. Our plans for the future made us laugh and feel close, but those same plans somehow made anything more than temporary between us seem impossible. It was the first time I'd ever had the feeling of missing someone I was still with.

The waiters in the Pilsen wore short black jackets over long white aprons. They were old men from the old country. We went there often enough to have our own special waiter, Rudi, a name he pronounced with a rolled *R*. Rudi boned our trout and seasoned our salads, and at the end of the meal he'd bring the bottle of crème de cacao from the bar, along with two little glasses and a small pitcher of heavy cream, and make us each a King Alphonse right at our table. We'd watch as he'd fill the glasses halfway up with the syrupy brown liqueur, then carefully attempt to float a layer of cream on top. If he failed to float the cream, we'd get that one free.

"Who was King Alphonse anyway, Rudi?" I sometimes asked, trying to break his concentration, and if that didn't work I nudged the table with my foot so the glass would jiggle imperceptibly just as he was floating the cream. We'd usually get one on the house. Rudi knew what I was doing. In fact, serving the King Alphonses had been his idea, and he had also suggested the trick of jarring the table. I think it pleased him, though he seemed concerned about the way I'd stare into the liqueur glass, watching the patterns.

"It's not a microscope," he'd say. "Drink."

He liked us, and we tipped extra. It felt good to be there and to be able to pay for a meal.

Kate and I met at the Pilsen for supper on my twenty-second birthday. It was May, and unseasonably hot. I'd opened my tie. Even before looking at the dinner menu, we ordered a bottle of Mumm's and a dozen oysters apiece. Rudi made a sly remark when he brought the oysters on platters of ice. They were freshly opened and smelled of the sea. I'd heard people joke about oysters being aphrodisiac but never considered it anything but a myth—the kind of idea they still had in the old country.

We squeezed on lemon, added dabs of horseradish, slid the oysters into our mouths, and then rinsed the shells with champagne and drank the salty, cold juice. There was a beefy-looking couple eating schnitzel at the next table, and they stared at us with the repugnance that public oyster-eaters in the Midwest often encounter. We laughed and grandly sipped it all down. I was already half tipsy from drinking too fast, and starting to feel filled with a euphoric, aching energy. Kate raised a brimming oyster shell to me in a toast: "To the Peace Corps!"

"To Europe!" I replied, and we clunked shells.

She touched her wineglass to mine and whispered, "Happy birthday," and then suddenly leaned across the table and kissed me.

When she sat down again, she was flushed. I caught the reflection of her face in the glass-covered "The Street Musicians of Prague" above our table. I always loved seeing her in mirrors and windows. The reflections of her beauty startled me. I had told her that once, and she seemed to fend off the compliment, saying, "That's because you've learned what to look for," as if it were a secret I'd stumbled upon. But, this time, seeing her reflection hovering ghostlike upon an imaginary Prague was like seeing a future from which she had vanished. I knew I'd never meet anyone more beautiful to me.

We killed the champagne and sat twining fingers across the table. I was sweating. I could feel the warmth of her through her skirt under the table and I touched her leg. We still hadn't ordered dinner. I left money on the table and we steered each other out a little unsteadily.

"Rudi will understand," I said.

The street was blindingly bright. A reddish sun angled just above the rims of the tallest buildings. I took my suit coat off and flipped it over my shoulder. We stopped in the doorway of a shoe store to kiss.

"Let's go somewhere," she said.

My roommate would already be home at my place, which was closer. Kate lived up north, in Evanston. It seemed a long way away.

We cut down a side street, past a fire station, to a small park, but its gate was locked. I pressed close to her against the tall iron fence. We could smell the lilacs from a bush just inside the fence, and when I jumped for an overhanging branch my shirt sleeve hooked on a fence spike and tore, and petals rained down on us as the sprig sprang from my hand.

We walked to the subway. The evening rush was winding down; we must have caught the last express heading toward Evanston. Once the train climbed from the

tunnel to the elevated tracks, it wouldn't stop until the end of the line, on Howard. There weren't any seats together, so we stood swaying at the front of the car, beside the empty conductor's compartment. We wedged inside, and I clicked the door shut.

The train rocked and jounced, clattering north. We were kissing, trying to catch the rhythm of the ride with our bodies. The sun bronzed the windows on our side of the train. I lifted her skirt over her knees, hiked it higher so the sun shone off her thighs, and bunched it around her waist. She wouldn't stop kissing. She was moving her hips to pin us to each jolt of the train.

We were speeding past scorched brick walls, gray windows, back porches outlined in sun, roofs, and treetops—the landscape of the El I'd memorized from subway windows over a lifetime of rides: the podiatrist's foot sign past Fullerton; the bright pennants of Wrigley Field, at Addison; ancient hotels with TRANSIENTS WELCOME signs on their flaking back walls; peeling and graffiti-smudged billboards; the old cemetery just before Wilson Avenue. Even without looking, I knew almost exactly where we were. Within the compartment, the sound of our quick breathing was louder than the clatter of tracks. I was trying to slow down, to make it all last, and when she covered my mouth with her hand I turned my face to the window and looked out.

The train was braking a little from express speed, as it did each time it passed a local station. I could see blurred faces on the long wooden platform watching us pass—businessmen glancing up from folded newspapers, women clutching purses and shopping bags. I could see the expression on each face, momentarily arrested, as we flashed by. A high school kid in shirt sleeves, maybe sixteen, with books tucked under one arm and a cigarette in his mouth, caught sight of us, and in the instant before he disappeared he grinned and started to wave. Then he was gone, and I turned from the window, back to Kate, forgetting everything—the passing stations, the glowing late sky, even the sense of missing her—but that arrested wave stayed with me. It was as if I were standing on that platform, with my schoolbooks and a smoke, on one of those endlessly accumulated afternoons after school when I stood almost outside of time simply waiting for a train, and I thought how much I'd have loved seeing someone like us streaming by.

Stuart Dybek (1942) has published three books of fiction including most recently I Sailed With Magellan. *He has also published two books of poems including* Brass Knuckles. *He often writes about urban life in immigrant neighborhoods in Chicago. He is writer in residence at Northwestern University. In 2007 he was awarded the a John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation Fellowship—often referred to as a genius grant.*

Source: Dybek, Stuart. "Pet Milk." *The Coast of Chicago.* New York: Knopf, 1990. 163–73. Print.

CHAPTER 8

RESEARCH W

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