

15 LANGUAGE

Fiction and drama depend upon language just as poetry does, but in a poem almost everything comes down to the particular meanings and implications of individual words. When we read stories and plays, we generally focus our attention on character and plot, and although words determine how we imagine those characters and how we respond to what happens to them, we are not as likely to pause over any one word as we may need to when reading a poem. Because poems are often short, a lot depends on every word in them. Sometimes, as though they were distilled prose, poems contain only the essential words. They say just barely enough to communicate in the most basic way, using elemental signs—with each chosen for exactly the right shade of meaning or feeling or both. But elemental does not necessarily mean simple, and these signs may be very rich in their meanings and complex in their effects. The poet's word choice—the **diction** of a poem—determines not only meaning but just about every effect the poem produces.

PRECISION AND AMBIGUITY

Let's look first at poems that create some of their effects by examining—or playing with—a single word. Often multiple meanings or shiftiness and uncertainty of a word are at issue. The following short poem, for example, depends almost entirely on the way we use the word *play*.

SARAH CLEGHORN

[The golf links lie so near the mill]

The golf links lie so near the mill
That almost every day
The laboring children can look out
And see the men at play.

1915

While traveling in the American South, Cleghorn had seen, right next to a golf course, a textile mill that employed quite young children. Her poem doesn't *say* that we expect men to work and children to play; it just assumes our

expectation and builds an effect of **dramatic irony**—an incongruity between what we expect and what actually occurs—out of the observation. The poem saves almost all of its devastating effect for the final word, after the situation has been carefully described and the irony set up.

In the following two poems, a word used over and over acquires multiple meanings and refuses to be limited to a single one.

ANNE FINCH, COUNTESS OF WINCHELSEA

There's No To-morrow

A Fable imitated from Sir Roger L'Estrange

- Two long had Lov'd, and now the Nymph desir'd,
 The Cloak of Wedlock, as the Case requir'd;
 Urg'd that, the Day he wrought her to this Sorrow,
 He Vow'd, that he wou'd marry her To-Morrow.
 5 Agen he Swears, to shun the present Storm,
 That he, To-Morrow, will that Vow perform.
 The Morrows in their due Successions came;
 Impatient still on Each, the pregnant Dame
 Urg'd him to keep his Word, and still he swore the same.
 10 When tir'd at length, and meaning no Redress,
 But yet the Lye not caring to confess,
 He for his Oath this Salvo chose to borrow,
 That he was Free, since there was no To-Morrow;
 For when it comes in Place to be employ'd,
 15 'Tis then To-Day; To-Morrow's ne'er enjoy'd.
 The Tale's a Jest, the Moral is a Truth;
 To-Morrow and To-Morrow, cheat our Youth:
 In riper Age, To-Morrow still we cry,
 Not thinking, that the present Day we Dye;
 20 Unpractis'd all the Good we had Design'd;
 There's No To-Morrow to a Willing Mind.

1713

CHARLES BERNSTEIN

Of Time and the Line

George Burns¹ likes to insist that he always
 takes the straight lines; the cigar in his mouth
 is a way of leaving space between the

1. American comedian (1896–1996) who played straight man to his wife, Gracie Allen.

lines for a laugh. He weaves lines together
 5 by means of a picaresque narrative;
 not so Hennie Youngman,² whose lines are strictly
 paratactic. My father pushed a
 line of ladies' dresses—not down the street
 in a pushcart but upstairs in a fact'ry
 10 office. My mother has been more concerned
 with her hemline. Chairman Mao³ put forward
 Maoist lines, but that's been abandoned (mostly)
 for the East-West line of malarkey
 so popular in these parts. The prestige
 15 of the iambic line has recently
 suffered decline, since it's no longer so
 clear who "I" am, much less who *you* are. When
 making a line, better be double sure
 what you're lining in & what you're lining
 20 out & which side of the line you're on; the
 world is made up so (Adam didn't so much
 name as delineate). Every poem's got
 a prosodic lining, some of which will
 unzip for summer wear. The lines of an
 25 imaginary are inscribed on the
 social flesh by the knife-point of history.
 Nowadays, you can often spot a work
 of poetry by whether it's in lines
 or no; if it's in prose, there's a good chance
 30 it's a poem. While there is no lesson in
 the line more useful than that of the pick-
 et line, the line that has caused the most ad-
 versity is the bloodline. In Russia
 everyone is worried about long lines;
 35 back in the USA, it's strictly soup-
 lines. "Take a chisel to write," but for an
 actor a line's got to be cued. Or, as
 they say in math, it takes two lines to make
 an angle but only one lime to make
 40 a Margarita.

1991

The Finch poem repeatedly explores the shifting sands of the word "tomorrow," first noting how different people may think of its meanings differently, then showing how these shifts are anchored in time and the whole process of meaning. The Bernstein poem finds a great variety of completely different meanings of the word "line." How many different meanings can you distinguish in the poem? What does "Time" (in the title) have to do with the poem?

2. American comedian (1906–1998), stand-up king of the one-liner.

3. Mao Zedong (1893–1976), leader of the revolution that established China as a communist nation.

Here is a far more personal and emotional poem, which uses a single word, “terminal,” to explore the changing relationship between two people—a father (who speaks the poem) and daughter.

YVOR WINTERS

At the San Francisco Airport

to my daughter, 1954

- This is the terminal: the light
 Gives perfect vision, false and hard;
 The metal glitters, deep and bright.
 Great planes are waiting in the yard—
 5 They are already in the night.
- And you are here beside me, small,
 Contained and fragile, and intent
 On things that I but half recall—
 Yet going whither you are bent.
 10 I am the past, and that is all.
- But you and I in part are one:
 The frightened brain, the nervous will,
 The knowledge of what must be done,
 The passion to acquire the skill
 15 To face that which you dare not shun.
- The rain of matter upon sense
 Destroys me momentarily. The score:
 There comes what will come. The expense
 Is what one thought, and something more—
 20 One's being and intelligence.
- This is the terminal, the break.
 Beyond this point, on lines of air,
 You take the way that you must take;
 And I remain in light and stare—
 25 In light, and nothing else, awake.

1954

In this case, the poem soberly and thoughtfully probes the several possible meanings of its key word. The importance of the word involves its **ambiguity** (its having more than one possible meaning) rather than its **precision** (its exactness).

What does it *mean* to be in a place called a “terminal”? As the parting of father and daughter is explored carefully, the place of parting and the means of transportation take on meanings larger than their simple referential ones. The poem presents contrasts—young and old, light and dark, past and present, security and adventure. The father (“I am the past,” line 10) remains in the light, among known

objects and experiences familiar to his many years; the daughter is about to depart into the night, the unknown, the uncertain future. But they both share a sense of the necessity of the parting, of the need for the daughter to mature, gain knowledge, acquire experience. Is she going off to school? to college? to her first job? We don't know, but her plane ride clearly means a new departure and a clean break with childhood, dependency, the past.

So much depends upon the word "terminal." It refers to the airport building, of course, but it also implies a boundary, an extremity, a terminus, something that is limited, a junction, a place where a connection may be broken. Important as well is the unambiguous or "dictionary" meaning of certain other words—that is, what these words **denote**. The final stanza is articulated flatly, as if the speaker has recovered from the momentary confusion of stanza 4, when "being and intelligence" are lost in the emotion of the parting itself. The words "break," "point," "way," and "remain" are almost unemotional and colorless; they do not make value judgments or offer personal views, but rather define and describe. The sharp articulation of the last stanza stresses the **denotations** of the words employed, as though the speaker is trying to disengage himself from the emotion of the situation and just give the facts.

Words, however, are more than hard blocks of meaning on whose sense everyone agrees. They also have a more personal side, and they carry emotional force and shades of suggestion. The words we use indicate not only what we mean but how we feel about it, and we choose words that we hope will engage others emotionally and persuasively, in conversation and daily usage as well as in poems. A

*A poet is, before anything
else, a person who
is passionately in love
with language.*

—W. H. AUDEN

person who holds office is, quite literally (and unemotionally), an *officeholder*—the word denotes what he or she does. But if we want to convey that a particular officeholder is wise, trustworthy, and deserving of political support we may call that person a *civil servant*, a *political leader*, or an *elected official*, whereas if we want to promote distrust or contempt of that same officeholder we might say *politician* or *bureaucrat* or *political hack*. These latter terms have clear **connotations**—suggestions of emotional coloration that imply our attitude and invite a similar one from our hearers. What words **connote** can be just as important to a poem as what they denote; some poems work primarily through denotation and some more through connotation.

"At the San Francisco Airport," certainly, depends primarily on denotation. The speaker tries to *specify* the meanings and implications of the parting with his daughter, and his tendency to split categories neatly for the two of them at first contributes to the sense of clarity and certainty he wants to project. He is the past (line 10) and what remains (line 24); he has age and experience, his life is the known quantity, he stands in the light. She, on the other hand, is committed to the adventure of going into the night; she seems small, fragile, and her identity blurs into the uncertain future. Yet the connotations of some words carry strong emotional force as well as clear definition: that the daughter seems "small" and "fragile" to the speaker suggests his fear for her, something quite different from her own sense of adventure. The neat, clean categories keep breaking down, and the speaker's feelings keep showing through. In stanza 1, the light in the terminal gives "perfect vision," but the speaker also notices, indirectly, its artificial quality: it is "false" and "hard," suggesting the limits of the rationalism he tries to maintain. That artificial light shines over most of the poem and honors the speaker's

effort, but the whole poem represents his struggle, and in stanza 4 the signals of disturbance are very strong as, despite an insistence on a vocabulary of calculation, his rational facade collapses completely. If we have observed his verbal strategies carefully, we should not be surprised to find him at the end just *staring* in the artificial light, merely awake, although the poem has shown him to be unconsciously awake to much more than he will candidly admit.

“At the San Francisco Airport” is an unusually intricate and complicated poem, and it offers us, if we are willing to examine precisely its carefully crafted fabric, rich insight into how complex it is to be human and to have human feelings and foibles when we think we must be rational machines.

But connotations can work more simply. The following epitaph, for example, even though it describes the mixed feelings one person has about another, depends heavily on the connotations of fairly common words.

WALTER DE LA MARE

Slim Cunning Hands

Slim cunning hands at rest, and cozening eyes—
Under this stone one loved too wildly lies;
How false she was, no granite could declare;
Nor all earth's flowers, how fair.

1950

What the speaker in “Slim Cunning Hands” remembers about the dead woman—her hands, her eyes—tells part of the story; her physical presence was clearly important to him. The poem’s other nouns—stone, granite, flowers—all remind us of her death and its finality. All these words denote objects having to do with the rituals that memorialize a departed life. Granite and stone connote finality as well, and flowers connote fragility and suggest the shortness of life (which is why they have become the symbolic language of funerals). The way the speaker talks about the woman expresses, in just a few words, the complexity of his love for her. She was loved, he says, too “wildly”—by him perhaps, and apparently by others. The excitement she offered is suggested by the word, and also the lack of control. The words “cunning” and “cozening” help us interpret both her wildness and her falsity; they suggest her calculation, cleverness, and untrustworthiness as well as her skill, persuasiveness, and ability to please. Moreover, coming at the end of the second line the word “lies” has more than one meaning. The body “lies” under the stone, but the woman’s falsity has by now become too prominent to ignore as a second meaning. And the word “fair,” a simple yet very inclusive word, suggests how totally attractive the speaker finds her: her beauty can no more be expressed by flowers than her fickleness can be expressed by something as permanent as words in stone. But the word “fair,” in the emphatic position as the final word, also implies two other meanings that seem to resonate, ironically, with what we have already learned about her from the speaker: “impartial” and “just.” “Impartial” she may be in her preferences (as the word “false” suggests),

but to the speaker she is hardly “just,” and the final defining word speaks both to her appearance and (ironically) to her character. Simple words here tell us perhaps all we need to know of a long story—or at least the speaker’s version of it.

Words like “fair” and “cozening” are clearly loaded. They imply more emotionally than they mean literally. They have strong, clear connotations; they tell us what to think, what evaluation to make; and they suggest the basis for the evaluation. Both words in the title of the following poem similarly turn out to be key ones to its meaning and effect:

PAT MORA

Gentle Communion

Even the long-dead are willing to move.
Without a word, she came with me from the desert.
Mornings she wanders through my rooms
making beds, folding socks.

5 Since she can’t hear me anymore,
Mamande⁴ ignores the questions I never knew
to ask, about her younger days, her red
hair, the time she fell and broke her nose
in the snow. I will never know.

10 When I try to make her laugh,
to disprove her sad album face, she leaves
the room, resists me as she resisted
grinning for cameras, make-up, English.

While I write, she sits and prays,
15 feet apart, legs never crossed,
the blue housecoat buttoned high
as her hair dries white, girlish
around her head and shoulders.

She closes her eyes, bows her head,
20 and like a child presses her hands together,
her patient flesh steeple, the skin
worn, like the pages of her prayer book.

Sometimes I sit in her wide-armed
chair as I once sat in her lap.

25 Alone, we played a quiet I Spy.
She peeled grapes I still taste.

She removes the thin skin, places
the luminous coolness on my tongue.

4. A child’s conflation of *mama grande* (Spanish for “grandmother”).

I know not to bite or chew. I wait
 30 for the thick melt,
 our private green honey.

1991

Neither of the words in the title appears in the text itself, but both resonate throughout the poem. “Communion” is the more powerful of the words; here, it comes to imply the close ritualized relationship between the speaker and “Mamande.” Mamande has long been dead but now returns, recalling to the speaker a host of memories and providing a sense of history and family identity. To the speaker, the reunion has a powerful value, reminding her of rituals, habits, and beliefs that “place” her and affirm her heritage. The past is strong in the speaker’s mind and in the poem. Many details are recalled from album photographs—the blue housecoat (line 16), the sad face (line 11), the white hair that was once red (lines 7–8 and 17), the posture at prayer (lines 19–22), the big chair (lines 23–24), the plain old-fashioned style (line 13)—and the speaker’s childhood memories fade into them as she recalls a specific intimate moment.

The full effect of the word “communion”—which describes an intimate moment of union and a ritual—comes only in the final lines, when the speaker remembers the secret of the grapes and recalls their sensuous feel and taste. The moment brings together the experience of different generations and cultures and represents a sacred sharing: the Spanish grandmother had resisted English, modernity, and show (line 13), and the speaker is a poet, writing (and publishing) in English, but the two have a common “private” (line 31) moment ritually shared and forever memorable. At the end, too, the full sense of “gentle” becomes evident—a word that sums up the softness, quietness, and understatedness of the experience, the personal qualities of “Mamande,” and the unpretentious but dignified social level of the family heritage. Throughout the text, other words—ordinary, simple, and precise—suggest the sense of personal dignity, revealed identity, and verbal power that the speaker comes to accept as her own. Look especially at the words “move” (line 1), “steeple” (line 21), and “luminous” (line 28).

Words are the starting point for all poetry, of course, and almost every word is likely to be significant, either denotatively or connotatively or both. Poets who know their craft pick each word with care to express exactly what needs to be expressed and to suggest every emotional shade that the poem is calculated to evoke in us. Often individual words qualify and amplify one another—suggestions clarify other suggestions, and meanings grow upon meanings—and thus the way the words are put together can be important, too. Notice, for example, that in “Slim Cunning Hands” the final emphasis is on how *fair* in appearance the woman was; the speaker’s last word describes the quality he can’t forget in spite of her lack of a different kind of fairness and his distrust of her, the quality that, even though it doesn’t justify everything else, mitigates all the disappointment and hurt.

That one word does not stand all by itself, however, any more than any other word in a poem can be considered all alone. Every word exists within larger units of meaning—sentences, patterns of comparisons and contrasts, the whole poem—and where the word is and how it is used are often important. The final word or words may be especially emphatic (as in “Slim Cunning Hands”), and words that

are repeated take on a special intensity, as “terminal” does in “At the San Francisco Airport,” or as “chartered” and “cry” do in “London” (chapter 12), or “what did I know?” in “Those Winter Sundays” (chapter 12). Certain words often stand out, because they are used in an unusual way (like “chartered” in “London”) or because they are given an artificial prominence—through unusual sentence structure, for example, or because the title calls special attention to them.

Sometimes word choice in poems is less dramatic and less obviously “significant” but equally important. Often, in fact, simple appropriateness makes the words in a poem work, and words that do not call special attention to themselves can be the most effective. Precision of denotation may be just as impressive and productive of specific effects as the resonance or ambiguous suggestiveness of connotation. Often poems achieve their power by a combination of verbal effects, setting off elaborate figures of speech (which we will discuss shortly) or other complicated strategies with simple words chosen to mark exact actions, moments, or states of mind. Notice, for example, how carefully the following poem produces its complex description of emotional patterns by delineating and then elaborating precise stages of feeling.

EMILY DICKINSON

[After great pain, a formal feeling comes—]

After great pain, a formal feeling comes—
The Nerves sit ceremonious, like Tombs—
The stiff Heart questions was it He, that bore,
And Yesterday, or Centuries before?

5 The Feet, mechanical, go round—
Of Ground, or Air, or Ought—
A Wooden way
Regardless grown,
A Quartz contentment, like a stone—

10 This is the Hour of Lead—
Remembered, if outlived,
As Freezing Persons recollect the Snow—
First—Chill—then Stupor—then the letting go—

ca. 1862

As you read the following poem, notice how the title calls upon us to wonder, from the beginning, how playful and how patterned the boy’s bedtime romp with his father is. Try to be conscious of the emotional effects created by what seem to be the key words. Which words establish the bond between the two males?

THEODORE ROETHKE

My Papa's Waltz

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

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

- The hand that held my wrist
 10 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,
 15 Then waltzed me off to bed
 Still clinging to your shirt.

1948

Exactly what is the situation in “My Papa’s Waltz”? What are the family’s economic circumstances? How can you tell? What indications are there of the family’s social class, or of the father’s line of work? How would you characterize the speaker? How does the poem indicate his pleasure in the bedtime ritual? Which words suggest the boy’s excitement? Which suggest his anxiety? How can you tell the speaker’s feelings about his father? What clues are there about what the mother is like? What clues are there in the word choice that an adult is remembering a childhood experience? How scared was the boy at the time? How does the grown adult now evaluate his emotions when he was a boy? In what sense is the poem a tribute to memories of the father? How would you describe the poem’s tone?

The subtlety and force of word choice is sometimes very much affected by **word order**, the way the sentences are put together. Some poems employ unusual word order because of the demands of rhyme and meter, but ordinarily poets use word order very much as prose writers do, to create a particular emphasis. When you find an unusual word order, you can be pretty sure that something there merits special attention. Notice the odd constructions in the second and third stanzas of “My Papa’s Waltz”—the way the speaker talks about the abrasion of buckle on ear in line 12, for example. He does not say that the buckle scraped his ear, but rather puts it the other way round—a big difference in the kind of effect created, for it avoids placing blame and refuses to specify any unpleasant effect. Had he said that the buckle scraped his ear—the normal way of putting it—we would have to worry about the fragile ear. The **syntax** (sentence structure) of the poem channels our feeling and helps to control what we think of the “waltz.”

In the most curious part of the poem, the second stanza, the silent mother appears, and the syntax is peculiar in two places. In lines 5–6, the connection between the romping and the pans falling is stated oddly: “We romped *until* the pans / Slid from the kitchen shelf” (emphasis added). The speaker does not say that they knocked down the pans or imply awkwardness, but he does suggest energetic activity and duration. He implies intensity, almost intention—as though the romping would not be complete until the pans fell. And the sentence about the mother—odd but effective—makes her position clear. A silent bystander in this male ritual, she doesn’t seem frightened or angry. She seems to be holding a frown, or to have it molded on her face, as though it were part of her own ritual, and perhaps a facet of her stern character as well. The syntax implies that she *has to* maintain the frown, and the falling of the pans almost seems to be for her benefit. She disapproves, but she remains their audience.

Sometimes poems create, as well, a powerful sense of the way minds and emotions work by varying normal syntactical order in special ways. Listen, for example, in the following poem to the speaker’s sudden loss of vocal control in the midst of what seems to be a calm analysis of her feelings about sexual behavior.

SHARON OLDS

Sex without Love

How do they do it, the ones who make love
without love? Beautiful as dancers,
gliding over each other like ice-skaters
over the ice, fingers hooked
5 inside each other’s bodies, faces
red as steak, wine, wet as the
children at birth whose mothers are going to
give them away. How do they come to the
come to the come to the God come to the
10 still waters, and not love
the one who came there with them, light
rising slowly as steam off their joined
skin? These are the true religious,
the purists, the pros, the ones who will not
15 accept a false Messiah, love the
priest instead of the God. They do not
mistake the lover for their own pleasure,
they are like great runners: they know they are alone
with the road surface, the cold, the wind,
20 the fit of their shoes, their over-all cardio-
vascular health—just factors, like the partner
in the bed, and not the truth, which is the
single body alone in the universe
against its own best time.

The poem starts calmly enough, with a simple rhetorical question implying that the speaker just cannot understand sex without love. Lines 2–4 compare such sexual activity with some distant aesthetic, with two carefully delineated examples, and the speaker—although plainly disapproving—seems coolly in control of the analysis and evaluation. But by the end of the fourth line, something begins to seem odd: “hooked” seems too ugly and extreme a way to characterize the lovers’ fingers, however much the speaker may disapprove, and by line 6 the syntax seems to break down. How does “wine” fit the syntax of the line? Is it parallel with “steak,” another example of redness? Or is it somehow related to the last part of the sentence, parallel with “faces”? Neither of these possibilities quite works. At best, the punctuation is inadequate; at worst, the speaker’s mind is working too fast for the language it generates, scrambling its images. We can’t yet be sure what is going on, but by the ninth line the lack of control is manifest with the compulsive repeating (three times) of “come to the” and the interjected “God.”

Such verbal behavior—here concretized by the way the poem orders its words—invites us to reevaluate the speaker’s moralism relative to her emotional involvement with the issues and with her representation of sexuality itself. The speaker’s values, as well as those who have sex without love, become a subject for evaluation.

Words, the basic materials of poetry, come in many kinds and can be used in many different ways and in different—sometimes surprising—combinations. They are seldom simple or transparent, even when we know their meanings and recognize their syntactical combinations as ordinary and conventional. Carefully examining them, individually and collectively, is a crucial part of reading poems, and being able to ask good questions about the words that poems use is one of the most basic—and rewarding—skills a reader of poetry can develop.

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MARTHA COLLINS

Lies

Anyone can get it wrong, laying low
 when she ought to lie, but is it a lie
 for her to say she laid him when we know
 he wouldn’t lie still long enough to let
 5 her do it? A good lay is not a song,
 not anymore; a good lie is something
 else: lyrics, lines, what if you say *dear sister*
 when you have no sister, what if you say *guns*
 when you saw no guns, though you know
 10 they’re there? *She laid down her arms; she lay*
down, her arms by her sides. If we don’t know,
 do we lie if we say? If we don’t say, do we lie
 down on the job? To arms! in any case
 dear friends. If we must lie, let’s not lie around.

1999

- How many different meanings of “lie” and “lay” does this poem contain? What would you say is the poem’s real subject?

EMILY DICKINSON

[I dwell in Possibility—]

I dwell in Possibility—
 A fairer House than Prose—
 More numerous of Windows—
 Superior—for Doors—

5 Of Chambers as the Cedars—
 Impregnable of Eye—
 And for an Everlasting Roof
 The Gambrels⁵ of the Sky—

Of Visitors—the fairest—
 10 For Occupation—This—
 The spreading wide my narrow Hands
 To gather Paradise—

ca. 1862

- What does Dickinson seem to mean by “Possibility”? How does the poem’s ending broaden this meaning?

WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS

The Red Wheelbarrow

so much depends
 upon
 a red wheel
 barrow

5 glazed with rain
 water

beside the white
 chickens.

1923

- Why do you think the poet has included the details of the “rain / water” and “the white / chickens”?

5. Roofs with double slopes.

*This Is Just to Say*

I have eaten
 the plums
 that were in
 the icebox
 5 and which
 you were probably
 saving
 for breakfast
 Forgive me
 10 they were delicious
 so sweet
 and so cold
 1934

- What is meant by “This” in the poem’s title? What is the apparent occasion for this poem?

GERARD MANLEY HOPKINS

*Pied Beauty*⁶

Glory be to God for dappled things—
 For skies of couple-color as a brindled⁷ cow;
 For rose-moles all in stipple⁸ upon trout that swim;
 Fresh-firecoal chestnut-falls;⁹ finches’ wings;
 5 Landscape plotted and pieced—fold, fallow, and plow;
 And all trades, their gear and tackle and trim.
 All things counter, original, spare, strange;
 Whatever is fickle, freckled (who knows how?)
 With swift, slow; sweet, sour; adazzle, dim;
 10 He fathers-forth whose beauty is past change;
 Praise him.

1887

- How many ways of expressing mixed color can you find in this poem? How does Hopkins expand the meaning of “pied beauty”?

6. Particolored beauty: having patches or sections of more than one color. 7. Streaked or spotted.
 8. Rose-colored dots or flecks. 9. Fallen chestnuts as red as burning coals.

E. E. CUMMINGS

*[in Just-]*¹

in Just-
 spring when the world is mud-
 luscious the little
 lame balloonman
 5 whistles far and wee
 and eddieandbill come
 running from marbles and
 piracies and it's
 spring
 10 when the world is puddle-wonderful
 the queer
 old balloonman whistles
 far and wee
 and bettyandisbel come dancing
 15 from hop-scotch and jump-rope and
 it's
 spring
 and
 the
 20 goat-footed
 balloonMan² whistles
 far
 and
 wee

1923

- What are some connotations of “mud-luscious” and “puddle-wonderful”? What are some of the ways in which this poem challenges a reader’s expectations of diction and syntax?

1. The first poem in the series *Chansons innocentes*.

2. Pan, whose Greek name means “everything,” is traditionally represented with a syrinx (or the pipes of Pan). The upper half of his body is human, the lower half goat, and as the father of Silenus he is associated with the spring rites of Dionysus.

BEN JONSON

*Still to Be Neat*³

Still⁴ to be neat, still to be dressed,
 As you were going to a feast;
 Still to be powdered, still perfumed;
 Lady, it is to be presumed,
 5 Though art's hid causes are not found,
 All is not sweet, all is not sound.

 Give me a look, give me a face
 That makes simplicity a grace;
 Robes loosely flowing, hair as free;
 10 Such sweet neglect more taketh me
 Than all th' adulteries of art.
 They strike mine eyes, but not my heart.

1609

- What are at least two possible meanings of the poem's assertion that "all is not sound"? What are some connotations of "th' adulteries of art"?

ROBERT HERRICK

Delight in Disorder

A sweet disorder in the dress
 Kindles in clothes a wantonness.
 A lawn⁵ about the shoulders thrown
 Into a fine distractiön;
 5 An erring lace, which here and there
 Enthralls the crimson stomacher,⁶
 A cuff neglectful, and thereby
 Ribbands⁷ to flow confusedly;
 A winning wave, deserving note,
 10 In the tempestuous petticoat;
 A careless shoestring, in whose tie
 I see a wild civility;
 Do more bewitch me than when art
 Is too precise⁸ in every part.

1648

3. A song from Jonson's play *The Silent Woman* (1609–10). 4. Continually. 5. Scarf of fine linen.

6. Ornamental covering for the breasts. 7. Ribbons.

8. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Puritans were often called Precisians because of their fastidiousness.

- What are some of the words that “Delight in Disorder” uses to indicate “disorder”? Why do you think the speaker finds disorder “sweet”?

PICTURING: THE LANGUAGES OF DESCRIPTION

The language of poetry is most often visual and pictorial. Rather than depending primarily on abstract ideas and elaborate reasoning, poems depend mainly on concrete and specific words that create images in our minds. Poems thus help us to see things afresh and anew or to feel them suggestively through our other physical senses, such as hearing or touch. But mostly, poetry uses the sense of sight to help us form, in our minds, visual impressions, images that communicate more directly than concepts. We “see” yellow leaves on a branch, a father and son waltzing precariously, or two lovers sitting together on the bank of a stream, so that our response begins from a vivid impression of exactly what is happening. Some people think that those media and arts that challenge the imagination of a hearer or reader—radio drama, for example, or poetry—allow us to respond more fully than those (such as television or theater) that actually show things more fully to our physical senses. Certainly they leave more to our imagination, to our mind’s eye.

Visual applications of language stem from the nature and direction of the poetic process itself, and some of them have to do with how poems are conceived and then, gradually, fleshed out in words. Poems are sometimes quite abstract—they can even be *about* abstractions. But usually, they are quite concrete in what they ask us to see. One reason is that they often begin in a poet’s mind with a picture or an image: of a person, a place, an event, or an object of observation. That image may be based on something the poet has seen—that is, it may be a picture of something remembered by the poet—but it may also be totally imaginary and only based on the “real world” in the sense that it draws on the poet’s physical sense of what the world is like, including the people and things in it. Sometimes a poet represents an imagined scene or object in a highly stylized or feeling-centered way, as do, for example, impressionist or surrealist painters. But that process often begins from a quite specific image in the poet’s mind that he or she then tries to **represent**, in words, in such a way that readers can “see” it, too, through the poet’s vivid verbal representation of what he or she has already “seen” (imagined) in the mind.

Think of it this way: a painter or sculptor uses strategies of form, color, texture, viewpoint, and relationship to create a visual idea, and so the viewer begins with an *actual* image, something that can be seen physically (though the viewer’s understanding and interpretation may be many steps away). Even when a poet begins with an idea that draws on visual experience, however, the reader still has to *imagine* (through the poem’s words) an image, some person or thing or action that the poem describes. The poet must help the reader to flesh out that mental image on the basis of the words he or she uses. In a sense, then, the reader becomes a visual artist, but the poet directs how the visualization is to be done by evoking specific responses through words. *How* that happens can involve quite complicated verbal strategies—or even *visual* ones that draw on the possibilities of print (see chapter 18).

The languages of description are quite varied. The visual qualities of poetry result partly from the two aspects of poetic language described in the previous

section: on the one hand, the precision of individual words, and, on the other hand, precision's opposite—the reach, richness, and ambiguity of suggestion that words sometimes accrue. Visualization can also derive from sophisticated rhetorical and literary devices (figures of speech and symbols, for example, as we will see later in this chapter). But often description begins simply with naming—providing the word (noun, verb, adjective, or adverb) that will trigger images familiar from a reader's own experience. A reader can readily imagine a *dog* or *cat* or *house* or *flower* when each word is named, but not all readers will have the same kind of dog or flower come to mind (because of our individual experiences) until the word is qualified in some way. So the poet may specify that the dog is a greyhound or poodle, or that the flower is a daffodil or a lilac or Queen Anne's lace; or the poet may provide colors, sizes, specific movements, or particular identifying features. Such description can involve either narrowing by category or expansion through detail, and often comparisons are either explicitly or implicitly involved. In Richard Wilbur's "The Beautiful Changes," for example, the similarity between wading through flowers in a meadow and wading among waves in the sea helps to suggest how the first experience feels as well as to etch it visually in our minds. More than just a matter of naming, using precise words, and providing basic information, description involves qualification and comparison; sometimes the poet needs to tell us what a picture is not, dissociating what the poem describes from other possible images we may have in mind. Different features in the language of description add up to something that describes a whole—a picture or scene—as well as a series of individualized objects.

Seeing in the mind's eye—the re-creation of visual experience—requires different skills from poets and readers. Poets use all the language strategies they can think of to re-create for us something they have already "seen." Poets depend on our having had a rich variety of visual experiences and try to draw on those experiences by using common, evocative words and then refining the process through more elaborate verbal devices. We as readers inhabit the process the other way around, trying to draw on our previous knowledge so that we can "see" by following verbal clues. In the poems that follow, notice the ways that description leads to specific images, and pay attention to how shape, color, relationship, and perspective become clear, not only through individual words but also through combinations of words and phrases that suggest appearance and motion.

• • •

OSCAR WILDE

Symphony in Yellow

An omnibus across the bridge
 Crawls like a yellow butterfly,
 And, here and there, a passer-by
 Shows like a little restless midge.⁹

9. Tiny mosquito-like insect.

- 5 Big barges full of yellow hay
 Are moored against the shadowy wharf,
 And, like a yellow silken scarf,
 The thick fog hangs along the quay.
- The yellow leaves begin to fade
 10 And flutter from the Temple¹ elms,
 And at my feet the pale green Thames
 Lies like a rod of rippled jade.

1909

- What can you infer about London and its climate and the season from each of the yellow images in this poem?

RICHARD WILBUR

The Beautiful Changes

- One wading a Fall meadow finds on all sides
 The Queen Anne's Lace² lying like lilies
 On water; it glides
 So from the walker, it turns
 5 Dry grass to a lake, as the slightest shade of you
 Valleys my mind in fabulous blue Lucernes.³
- The beautiful changes as a forest is changed
 By a chameleon's tuning his skin to it;
 As a mantis, arranged
 10 On a green leaf, grows
 Into it, makes the leaf leafier, and proves
 Any greenness is deeper than anyone knows.
- Your hands hold roses always in a way that says
 They are not only yours; the beautiful changes
 15 In such kind ways,
 Wishing ever to sunder
 Things and things' selves for a second finding, to lose
 For a moment all that it touches back to wonder.

1947

- What part of speech is "Beautiful" in the poem's title and lines 7 and 14? What part of speech is "Changes"? What is meant by "the beautiful changes / In such kind ways" (lines 14–15)?

1. The law-courts area of London.

2. A plant sometimes called "wild carrot," with delicate, finger-like leaves and flat clusters of small white flowers.

3. Alfalfa, a plant resembling clover, with small purple flowers. Lake Lucerne is famed for its deep blue color and picturesque Swiss setting amid limestone mountains.

TED HUGHES

To Paint a Water Lily

A green level of lily leaves
 Roofs the pond's chamber and paves

The flies' furious arena: study
 These, the two minds of this lady.

- 5 First observe the air's dragonfly
 That eats meat, that bullets by

Or stands in space to take aim;
 Others as dangerous comb the hum

- Under the trees. There are battle-shouts
 10 And death-cries everywhere hereabouts

But inaudible, so the eyes praise
 To see the colors of these flies

Rainbow their arcs, spark, or settle
 Cooling like beads of molten metal

- 15 Through the spectrum. Think what worse
 Is the pond-bed's matter of course;

Prehistoric bedragonned times
 Crawl that darkness with Latin names,

- Have evolved no improvements there,
 20 Jaws for heads, the set stare,

Ignorant of age as of hour—
 Now paint the long-necked lily-flower

Which, deep in both worlds, can be still
 As a painting, trembling hardly at all

- 25 Though the dragonfly alight,
 Whatever horror nudge her root.

1960

- What are “the two minds of this lady” (line 4)? Whom do you think the speaker is addressing when he commands, “Now paint the long-necked lily flower” (line 22)?

ANDREW MARVELL

On a Drop of Dew

- See how the orient⁴ dew
 Shed from the bosom of the morn
 Into the blowing roses,
 Yet careless of its mansion new
 5 For⁵ the clear region where 'twas born
 Round in itself incloses,
 And in its little globe's extent
 Frames as it can its native element;
 How it the purple flow'r does slight,
 10 Scarce touching where it lies,
 But gazing back upon the skies,
 Shines with a mournful light
 Like its own tear,
 Because so long divided from the sphere.⁶
 15 Restless it rolls and unsecure,
 Trembling lest it grow impure,

 Till the warm sun pity its pain,
 And to the skies exhale it back again.
 So the soul, that drop, that ray
 20 Of the clear fountain of eternal day,
 Could it within the human flower be seen,
 Rememb'ring still its former height,
 Shuns the sweet leaves and blossoms green;
 And, recollecting its own light,
 25 Does, in its pure and circling thoughts, express
 The greater Heaven in an Heaven less.
 In how coy⁷ a figure wound,
 Every way it turns away;
 So the world excluding round,
 30 Yet receiving in the day:
 Dark beneath, but bright above,
 Here disdaining, there in love.

 How loose and easy hence to go,
 How girt and ready to ascend;
 35 Moving but on a point below,
 It all about does upwards bend.
 Such did the manna's sacred dew distill,

4. Shining. 5. By reason of. 6. Of heaven. 7. Reserved, withdrawn, modest.

White and entire, though congealed and chill;⁸
 Congealed on earth, but does, dissolving, run
 Into the glories of th' almighty sun.

1681

- How does the sun “exhale” (line 17) the drop of dew? “Back again” to where? Explain the comparison between the dewdrop and the human soul.

METAPHOR AND SIMILE

Being visual does not just mean describing, telling us facts, indicating shapes, colors, and specific details, and giving us precise discriminations through exacting verbs, nouns, adverbs, and adjectives. Often the vividness of the picture in our minds depends upon comparisons through **figures of speech**. What we are trying to imagine is pictured in terms of something else familiar to us, and we are asked to think of one thing as if it were something else. Many such comparisons, in which something is pictured or figured forth in terms of something already familiar to us, are taken for granted in daily life. Things we can't see or that aren't familiar to us are imaged as things we already know; for example, God is said to be like a father; Italy is said to be shaped like a boot; life is compared to a forest, a journey, or a sea. When the comparison is explicit—that is, when one thing is directly compared to something else—the figure is called a **simile**. When the comparison is implicit, with something described as if it were something else, it is called a **metaphor**.

Poems use **figurative language** much of the time. A poem may insist that death is like a sunset or sex like an earthquake or that the way to imagine how it feels to be spiritually secure is to think of the way a sheep is taken care of by a shepherd. The pictorialness of our imagination may *clarify* things for us—scenes, states of mind, ideas—but at the same time it stimulates us to think of how those pictures make us *feel*. Pictures, even when they are mental pictures or imagined visions, may be both denotative and connotative, just as individual words are: they may clarify and make precise, and they may evoke a range of feelings. In the poem that follows, the poet helps us visualize the old age and approaching death of the speaker by making comparisons with familiar things—the coming of winter, the approach of sunset, and the dying embers of a fire.

8. In the wilderness, the Israelites fed upon manna from heaven (distilled from the dew; see Exodus 16.10–21); manna became a traditional symbol for divine grace.

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

[That time of year thou mayst in me behold]

- That time of year thou mayst in me behold
 When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang
 Upon those boughs which shake against the cold,
 Bare ruined choirs, where late the sweet birds sang.
- 5 In me thou see'st the twilight of such day
 As after sunset fadeth in the west;
 Which by and by¹ black night doth take away,
 Death's second self,² that seals up all in rest.
- 10 In me thou see'st the glowing of such fire,
 That on the ashes of his youth doth lie,
 As the deathbed whereon it must expire,
 Consumed with that which it was nourished by.
 This thou perceiv'st, which makes thy love more strong,
 To love that well which thou must leave ere long.

1609

The first four lines of “That time of year” evoke images of the late autumn; but notice that the poet does not have the speaker say directly that his physical condition and age make him resemble autumn. He draws the comparison without stating it as a comparison: you can see my own state, he says, in the coming of winter, when almost all the leaves have fallen from the trees. The speaker portrays himself *indirectly* by talking about the passing of the year. The poem uses metaphor; that is, one thing is pictured *as if* it were something else. “That time of year” goes on to another metaphor in lines 5–8 and still another in lines 9–12, and each metaphor contributes to our understanding of the speaker’s sense of his old age and approaching death. More important, however, is the way the metaphors give us feelings, an emotional sense of the speaker’s age and of his own attitude toward aging. Through the metaphors we come to understand, appreciate, and to some extent share the increasing sense of urgency that the poem expresses. Our emotional sense of the poem depends largely on the way each metaphor is developed and by the way each metaphor leads, with its own kind of internal logic, to another.

The images of late autumn in the first four lines all suggest loneliness, loss, and nostalgia for earlier times. As in the rest of the poem, the speaker presents our eyes as the main vehicle for noticing his age and condition; in the phrase “thou mayst in me behold” (line 1) he introduces what he is asking us to see, and in both lines 5 and 9 he tells us similarly “In me thou see’st. . . .” The picture of the trees shedding their leaves suggests that autumn is nearly over, and we can imagine trees either with yellow leaves, or without leaves, or with just a trace of foliage remaining—the latter perhaps most feelingly suggesting the bleakness and

1. Shortly. 2. Sleep.

loneliness that characterize the change of seasons, the ending of the life cycle. But other senses are invoked, too. The boughs shaking against the cold represent an appeal to our tactile sense, and the next line appeals to our sense of hearing, although only by the silence of birds no longer singing. (Notice how exact the visual representation is of the bare, or nearly bare, limbs, even as the speaker notes the cold and the lack of birds; birds lined up like a choir on risers would have made a striking visual image on the barren limbs one above the other, but now there is only the *reminder* of what used to be. The present is quiet, bleak, and lonely; it is the absence of color, song, and life that underscores the visual impression, a reminder of what formerly was.)

The next four lines have a slightly different tone, and the color changes. From a black-and-white landscape with a few yellow leaves, we come upon a rich and almost warm reminder of a faded sunset. But a somber note enters the poem in these lines through another figure of speech, **personification**, which involves treating an abstraction, such as death or justice or beauty, as if it were a person. As the poem talks about the coming of night and of sleep, Sleep is personified as the “second self” of Death (that is, as a kind of “double” for death). The main emphasis is on how night and sleep close in on the twilight, and only secondarily does a reminder of death enter the poem. But it does enter.

The third metaphor—that of the dying embers of a fire—begins in line 9 and continues to color and warm the bleak cold that the poem began with, but it also sharpens the reminder of death. The three main metaphors in the poem work to make our sense of old age and approaching death more familiar but also more immediate: moving from barren trees, to fading twilight, to dying embers suggests a sensuous increase of color and warmth but also an increasing urgency. The first metaphor involves a whole season, or at least a segment of one, a matter of days or possibly weeks; the second involves the passing of a single day, reducing the time scale to a matter of minutes, and the third draws our attention to that split second when a glowing ember dies into a gray ash. The final part of the fire metaphor introduces the most explicit sense of death so far, as the metaphor of embers shifts into a direct reminder of death. Embers, which had been a metaphor of the speaker’s aging body, now themselves become, metaphorically, a deathbed; the vitality that nourishes youth is used up just as a log in a fire is. The urgency of the reminder of coming death has now peaked. It is friendlier but now seems immediate and inevitable, a natural part of the life process, and the final two lines then offer an explicit plea to make good and intense use of the remaining moments of human relationship.

“That time of year” represents an unusually intricate use of images to organize a poem and focus its emotional impact. Not all poems are so skillfully made, and not all depend on such a full and varied use of metaphor. But most poems use metaphors for at least part of their effect, and often a poem fully develops a single metaphor as its statement as in the following poem about the role of a mother and wife.

LINDA PASTAN

Marks

- My husband gives me an A
 for last night's supper,
 an incomplete for my ironing,
 a B plus in bed.
- 5 My son says I am average,
 an average mother, but if
 I put my mind to it
 I could improve.
 My daughter believes
- 10 in Pass/Fail and tells me
 I pass. Wait 'til they learn
 I'm dropping out.

1978

The speaker in "Marks" is obviously less than pleased with the idea of continually being judged, and the metaphor of marks (or grades) as a way of talking about her performance of family duties suggests her irritation. The list of the roles implies the many things expected of her, and the three different systems of marking (letter grades, categories to be checked off on a chart, and pass/fail) detail the difficulties of multiple standards. The poem retains the language of schooldays all the way to the end ("learn," line 11; "dropping out," line 12), and the major effect of the poem depends on the irony of the speaker's surrendering to the metaphor the family has thrust upon her; if she is to be judged as if she were a student, she retains the right to leave the system. Ironically, she joins the system (adopts the metaphor for herself) in order to defeat it.

The following poem depends from the beginning—even from its title—on a single metaphor and the values associated with it.

DAVID WAGONER

My Father's Garden

- On his way to the open hearth where white-hot steel
 Boiled against furnace walls in wait for his lance
 To pierce the fireclay and set loose demons
 And dragons in molten tons, blazing
- 5 Down to the huge satanic caldrons,
 Each day he would pass the scrapyards, his kind of garden.
- In rusty rockeries of stoves and brake drums,
 In grottoes of sewing machines and refrigerators,
 He would pick flowers for us: small gears and cogwheels

- 10 With teeth like petals, with holes for anthers,
 Long stalks of lead to be poured into toy soldiers,
 Ball bearings as big as grapes to knock them down.

He was called a melter. He tried to keep his brain
 From melting in those tyger-mouthed mills

- 15 Where the same steel reappeared over and over
 To be reborn in the fire as something better
 Or worse: cannons or cars, needles or girders,
 Flagpoles, swords, or plowshares.

But it melted. His classical learning ran

- 20 Down and away from him, not burning bright.
 His fingers culled a few cold scraps of Latin
 And Greek, *magna sine laude*,³ for crosswords
 And brought home lumps of tin and sewer grills
 As if they were his ripe prize vegetables.

1987

This poem pays tribute to the speaker's father and the things the father understands and values in his ordinary, workingman's life. The father, a "melter" (line 13) in the steel mills (lines 14–15), values things made from what he helps produce. His avocation has developed from his vocation: he collects metal objects from the scrapyards and brings them home just as another man might pick flowers for his family. The scrapyards are, says the speaker, "his kind of garden" (line 6). The father has led a hard life, but he shows love for his children in the only way he knows how—by bringing home things that mean something to him and that can be made into toys his children will come to value. Describing these scraps as the products of his garden—"As if they were his ripe prize vegetables" (line 24)—makes them seem homegrown, carefully tended, nurtured by the father into a useful beauty. Instead of crude and ugly pieces of scrap, they become—through the metaphor of the poem—examples of value and beauty corresponding to the warm feelings the speaker has for a father who did what he could with what he knew and what he had.

Sometimes, in poetry as in prose, comparisons are made explicitly, as in the following poem:

ROBERT BURNS

A Red, Red Rose

O, my luve's like a red, red rose
 That's newly sprung in June.
 O, my luve is like the melody
 That's sweetly played in tune.

3. Without great distinction; a reversal of the usual *magna cum laude*.

- 5 As fair art thou, my bonnie lass,
 So deep in luve am I;
 And I will luve thee still, my dear,
 Till a' the seas gang⁴ dry.
- Till a' the seas gang dry, my dear,
 10 And the rocks melt wi' the sun;
 And I will luve thee still, my dear,
 While the sands o' life shall run.
- And fare thee weel, my only luve,
 And fare thee weel a while!
- 15 And I will come again, my luve,
 Though it were ten thousand mile.

1796

The first four lines make two explicit comparisons: the speaker says that his love is “like a . . . rose” and “like [a] melodie.” As we noted earlier, such *explicit* comparisons are called *similes*, and usually (as here) the comparison involves the word *like* or the word *as*. Similes work much as do metaphors, except that usually they are used more passinglly, more incidentally; they make a quick comparison and usually do not elaborate, whereas metaphors often extend over a long section of a poem (in which case they are called **extended metaphors**) or even over the whole poem, as in “Marks” (in which case they are called **controlling metaphors**).

The two similes in “A Red, Red Rose” assume that we already have a favorable opinion of roses and of melodies. Here the poet does not develop the comparison or even remind us of attractive details about roses or tunes. He pays the quick compliment and moves on. Similes sometimes develop more elaborate comparisons than this and occasionally, as in Marvell’s “On a Drop of Dew,” even govern long sections of a poem (in which case they are called **analogies**). Usually, though, a simile is briefer and relies more fully on something we already know. The speaker in “My Papa’s Waltz” says that he hung on “like death”; he doesn’t have to explain or elaborate the comparison: we know the anxiety he refers to.

Like metaphors, similes may imply both meaning and feeling; they may both explain something and invoke feelings about it. All figurative language involves an attempt to clarify something *and* to prompt readers to feel a certain way about it. Saying that one’s love is like a rose implies a delicate and fragile beauty and invites our senses into play so that we can share sensuously a response to appealing fragrance and soft touch, just as the shivering boughs and dying embers in “That time of year” suggest separation and loss at the same time that they invite us to share both the cold sense of loneliness and the warmth of old friendship.

Once you start looking for them, you will find figures of speech in poem after poem; they are among the most common devices through which poets share their visions with us.

The following poem uses a variety of metaphors to describe sexual experiences:

4. Go.

ADRIENNE RICH

Two Songs

I

- Sex, as they harshly call it,
 I fell into this morning
 at ten o'clock, a drizzling hour
 of traffic and wet newspapers.
 5 I thought of him who yesterday
 clearly didn't
 turn me to a hot field
 ready for plowing,
 and longing for that young man
 10 piercé^d me to the roots
 bathing every vein, etc.⁵
 All day he appears to me
 touchingly desirable,
 a prize one could wreck one's peace for.
 15 I'd call it love if love
 didn't take so many years
 but lust too is a jewel
 a sweet flower and what
 pure happiness to know
 20 all our high-toned questions
 breed in a lively animal.

II

- That "old last act"!
 And yet sometimes
 all seems post coitum triste⁶
 25 and I a mere bystander.
 Somebody else is going off,
 getting shot to the moon.
 Or, a moon-race!
 Split seconds after
 30 my opposite number lands
 I make it—
 we lie fainting together
 at a crater-edge
 heavy as mercury in our moonsuits
 35 till he speaks
 in a different language
 yet one I've picked up
 through cultural exchanges . . .

5. See the opening lines of the Prologue to Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*.

6. Sadness after sexual union.

we murmur the first moonwords:

40 *Spasibo*.⁷ *Thanks. O.K.*

1964

The first “song” begins straightforwardly as narration (“Sex . . . I fell into this morning / at ten o’clock”), but the vividness of sex and desire is communicated mostly by figures of speech. The speaker compares her body to “a hot field / ready for plowing” (lines 7–8)—quite unlike her resistant body yesterday—and also describes her longing by metaphor, in this case an elaborate one borrowed from another poem. After so sensual and urgent a beginning, the song turns more thoughtful and philosophical, but even the intellectual sorting between love and lust comes to depend on metaphors: lust is a “jewel” (line 17) and a “flower” (line 18). After the opening pace and excitement, those later figures of speech seem calm and tame, moving the poem from the lust of its beginning to a contemplative reflection on the value and beauty of momentary physical pleasures.

The second song depends on two closely related metaphors, each highly self-conscious and a little comic. The song begins on a plaintive note, considering the classic melancholic feeling after sex; the speaker pictures herself as isolated, left out, “a mere bystander” (line 25), while someone else is having sexual pleasure. She describes the pleasure of others through two colloquial expressions (both metaphors) for sexual climax: “going off” (line 26) and “getting shot to the moon” (line 27). Suddenly the narrator pretends to take sex as space travel seriously and creates a metaphor of her own: sexual partners running a “moon-race” (line 28). In the rest of the poem, she presents the metaphor in the context of the space race between the United States and Russia in the early 1960s, and she describes the race, not exactly even but close enough, in detail. These are international relations—foreign affairs—and the lovers appropriately say their thank-yous separately in Russian and English, then sign off with an international “O.K.”

• • •

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

[Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?]

- Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?
 Thou art more lovely and more temperate.
 Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,
 And summer's lease hath all too short a date.
 5 Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines,
 And often is his gold complexion dimmed;
 And every fair from fair sometime declines,
 By chance or nature's changing course untrimmed.
 But thy eternal summer shall not fade,

7. Russian for “thanks.”

- 10 Nor lose possession of that fair thou ow'st,
 Nor shall Death brag thou wand'rest in his shade,
 When in eternal lines to time thou grow'st.
 So long as men can breathe or eyes can see,
 So long lives this,⁸ and this gives life to thee.
- 1609

- What sort of promise does the speaker make with this poem? Why can he boast that “thy eternal summer shall not fade”?

ANONYMOUS⁹

The Twenty-third Psalm

- The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.
 He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside
 the still waters.
 He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness
 for his name's sake.
 Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
 I will fear no evil: for thou art with me;
 thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.
- 5 Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies:
 thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.
 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life:
 and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.
- What is the controlling metaphor in this poem? At what point in the psalm does the controlling metaphor shift?

HENRY KING

*Sic Vita*¹

- Like to the falling of a star,
 Or as the flights of eagles are,
 Or like the fresh spring's gaudy hue,
 Or silver drops of morning dew,
 5 Or like a wind that chafes the flood,
 Or bubbles which on water stood:

8. This poem.

9. Traditionally attributed to King David. This English translation is from the King James Version of the Bible. 1. Such is life.

Even such is man, whose borrowed light
Is straight called in, and paid to night.

- The wind blows out, the bubble dies,
10 The spring entombed in autumn lies,
The dew dries up, the star is shot,
The flight is past, and man forgot.
1657

- What is a man's "light"? In what way is it "borrowed"? How many similes are there in this poem?

JOHN DONNE

*[Batter my heart, three-personed God]*²

- Batter my heart, three-personed God; for You
As yet but knock, breathe, shine, and seek to mend;
That I may rise and stand, o'erthrow me, and bend
Your force, to break, blow, burn, and make me new.
5 I, like an usurped town, to another due,
Labor to admit You, but Oh, to no end!
Reason, Your viceroy³ in me, me should defend,
But is captived, and proves weak or untrue.
Yet dearly I love You, and would be loved fain,⁴
10 But am betrothed unto Your enemy:
Divorce me, untie or break that knot again,
Take me to You, imprison me, for I,
Except You enthrall me, never shall be free,
Nor ever chaste, except You ravish me.

1633

- In the poem's controlling metaphor, who is the speaker? Who, or what, is God? To whom is the speaker "betrothed"?

The Computation

- For the first twenty years, since yesterday,
I scarce believed thou couldst be gone away;
For forty more, I fed on favors past,
And forty on hopes—that thou wouldst, they might, last.
5 Tears drowned one hundred, and sighs blew out two;
A thousand, I did neither think, nor do,

2. *Holy Sonnets*, 14. 3. One who rules as the representative of a higher power. 4. Gladly.

- Or not divide, all being one thought of you;
 Or in a thousand more forgot that too.
 Yet call not this long life, but think that I
 10 Am, by being dead, immortal. Can ghosts die?
 1633

- Who, or what, might be “thou” in the second line? What seems to be the cause of the speaker’s “death”?

The Canonization

- For God’s sake hold your tongue and let me love!
 Or⁵ chide my palsy or my gout,
 My five gray hairs or ruined fortune flout;
 With wealth your state, your mind with arts improve,
 5 Take you a course, get you a place,
 Observe his Honor or his Grace,
 Or the king’s real or his stampéd face⁶
 Contemplate; what you will, approve,
 So you will let me love.
- 10 Alas, alas, who’s injured by my love?
 What merchant’s ships have my sighs drowned?
 Who says my tears have overflowed his ground?
 When did my colds a forward spring remove?
 When did the heats which my veins fill
 15 Add one man to the plaguy bill?⁷
 Soldiers find wars, and lawyers find out still
 Litigious men which quarrels move,
 Though she and I do love.
- Call us what you will, we are made such by love.
 20 Call her one, me another fly,
 We’re tapers too, and at our own cost die;⁸
 And we in us find th’ eagle and the dove.⁹
 The phoenix riddle hath more wit¹
 By us; we two, being one, are it.
- 25 So to one neutral thing both sexes fit,
 We die and rise the same, and prove
 Mysterious by this love.

5. Either. 6. On coins. 7. List of plague victims.

8. Tapers—candles—consume themselves. To “die” is Renaissance slang for consummating the sexual act, which was popularly believed to shorten life by one day. *Fly*: a traditional symbol of transitory life.

9. Traditional symbols of strength and purity.

1. Meaning. According to tradition, only one phoenix existed at a time, dying in a funeral pyre of its own making and being reborn from its own ashes. The bird’s existence was thus a riddle akin to a religious mystery (line 27), and a symbol sometimes fused with Christian representations of immortality.

We can die by it, if not live by love;
 And if unfit for tombs and hearse
 30 Our legend be, it will be fit for verse;²
 And if no piece of chronicle we prove,
 We'll build in sonnets pretty rooms³
 (As well a well-wrought urn becomes⁴
 The greatest ashes, as half-acre tombs),
 35 And by these hymns all shall approve
 Us canonized for love.

 And thus invoke us: "You whom reverent love
 Made one another's hermitage,
 You to whom love was peace, that now is rage,
 40 Who did the whole world's soul extract, and drove⁵
 Into the glasses of your eyes
 (So made such mirrors and such spies
 That they did all to you epitomize)
 Countries, towns, courts; beg from above
 45 A pattern of your love!"

1633

- Whom does the speaker address in the first line, "hold your tongue"? Why does the speaker concede that he and his lover may not "prove" a "piece of chronicle" (line 31)?

DAVID FERRY

At the Hospital

She was the sentence the cancer spoke at last,
 Its blurred grammar finally clarified.

1983

- What, exactly, has "clarified" the cancer's "blurred grammar"?

2. That is, if we don't turn out to be an authenticated piece of historical narrative.

3. In Italian, *stanza* means room. 4. Befits. 5. Compressed.

RANDALL JARRELL

*The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner*⁶

From my mother's sleep I fell into the State,
 And I hunched in its belly till my wet fur froze.
 Six miles from earth, loosed from its dream of life,
 5 I woke to black flak and the nightmare fighters.
 When I died they washed me out of the turret with a hose.

1945

- What is meant by "I fell into the State"? What do the words "sleep," "dream," and "nightmare" suggest about the poem's basic situation?

FRANCIS WILLIAM BOURDILLON

The Night Has a Thousand Eyes

The night has a thousand eyes,
 And the day but one;
 Yet the light of the bright world dies
 With the dying sun.
 5 The mind has a thousand eyes,
 And the heart but one;
 Yet the light of a whole life dies
 When the love is gone.

1889

- What are the "thousand eyes" of the night? the single eye of the day? What, exactly, are the comparisons to the mind and the heart?

MARGARET CAVENDISH, DUCHESS OF NEWCASTLE

Of the Theme of Love

O Love, how thou art tired out with rhyme!
 Thou art a tree whereon all poets climb;
 And from thy branches every one takes some

6. A ball turret was a plexiglass sphere set into the belly of a B-17 or B-24 and inhabited by two .50 caliber machine-guns and one man, a short, small man. When this gunner tracked with his machine-guns a fighter attacking his bomber from below, he revolved with the turret; hunched upside-down in his little sphere, he looked like the foetus in the womb. The fighters which attacked him were armed with cannon firing explosive shells. The hose was a steam hose. [Jarrell's note]

Of thy sweet fruit, which fancy feeds upon.
 5 But now thy tree is left so bare and poor
 That they can hardly gather one plum more.

late 17th century

- Why does the speaker complain that “thy tree is left so bare and poor”?

EMILY DICKINSON

[*Wild Nights—Wild Nights!*]

Wild Nights—Wild Nights!
 Were I with thee
 Wild Nights should be
 Our luxury!

5 Futile—the Winds—
 To a Heart in port—
 Done with the Compass—
 Done with the Chart!

Rowing in Eden—
 10 Ah, the Sea!
 Might I but moor—Tonight—
 In Thee!

ca. 1861

- To what, exactly, does the speaker compare her love? What are some possible, even opposite, interpretations of the line “Done with the Chart”?

SYMBOL

The word *symbol* is often used sloppily and sometimes pretentiously, but properly used the term suggests one of the most basic things about poems—their ability to get beyond what words signify and to make larger claims about meanings in the verbal world. All words go beyond themselves. They are not simply a collection of sounds: they signify something beyond their sounds, often things or actions or ideas. Words describe not only a verbal universe but also a world in which actions occur, acts have implications, and events have meaning. Sometimes words signify something beyond themselves, say *rock* or *tree* or *cloud*, and symbolize something as well, such as solidity or life or dreams. Words can—when their implications are agreed on by tradition, convention, or habit—stand for things beyond their most immediate meanings or significations and become symbols, and even simple words

that have accumulated no special power from previous use may be given special significance in special circumstances—in poetry as in life itself.

A **symbol** is, put simply, something that stands for something else. The everyday world is full of common examples; a flag, a logo, a trademark, or a skull and crossbones all suggest things beyond themselves, and everyone likely understands what their display indicates, whether or not each viewer shares a commitment to what is thus represented. In common usage a prison symbolizes confinement, constriction, and loss of freedom, and in specialized traditional usage a cross may symbolize oppression, cruelty, suffering, death, resurrection, triumph, or an intersection of some kind (as in *crossroads* and *crosscurrents*). The specific symbolic significance depends on the context; for example, a reader might determine significance by looking at contiguous details in a poem and by examining the poem's attitude toward a particular tradition or body of beliefs. A star means one thing to a Jewish poet and something else to a Christian poet, still something else to a sailor or an actor. In a very literal sense, words themselves are all symbols (they stand for objects, actions, or qualities, not just for letters or sounds), but symbols in poetry are said to be those words and phrases that have a range of reference beyond their literal signification or denotation.

Poems sometimes create a symbol out of a thing, action, or event that has no previously agreed-upon symbolic significance. The following poem, for example, gives a seemingly random gesture symbolic significance:

SHARON OLDS

*Leningrad Cemetery, Winter of 1941*¹

- That winter, the dead could not be buried.
 The ground was frozen, the gravediggers weak from hunger,
 the coffin wood used for fuel. So they were covered with something
 and taken on a child's sled to the cemetery
 5 in the sub-zero air. They lay on the soil,
 some of them wrapped in dark cloth
 bound with rope like the tree's ball of roots
 when it waits to be planted; others wound in sheets,
 their pale, gauze, tapered shapes
 10 stiff as cocoons that will split down the center
 when the new life inside is prepared;
 but most lay like corpses, their coverings
 coming undone, naked calves
 hard as corded wood spilling
 15 from under a cloak, a hand reaching out
 with no sign of peace, wanting to come back
 even to the bread made of glue and sawdust,
 even to the icy winter, and the siege.

1979

1. The 900-day siege of Leningrad (now Saint Petersburg) during World War II began in September 1941.

All of these corpses—frozen, neglected, uncovered—vividly stamp upon our minds a picture of the horrors of war, one likely to stay in our minds long after we have finished reading the poem. Several details are striking, and the poem's language heightens our sense of them. The corpses wound in sheets, for example, are described in "their pale, gauze, tapered shapes" (line 9), and they are compared to cocoons that one day will split and emit new life; and the limbs that dangle loose when the coverings come undone are "hard as corded wood spilling" (line 14). But clearly the most memorable sight is the hand dangling from one corpse that is coming unwrapped, for the poet invests that hand with special significance, giving its gesture *meaning*. The hand is "reaching out . . . wanting to come back" (lines 15–16); it is as if the dead can still gesture even if they cannot speak, and the gesture seems to signify the desire of the dead to return at any price. They would be glad to live, even under the grim conditions that attend life in Leningrad during the war. Suddenly the grimness that we—the living—have been witnessing pales by comparison with what the dead have lost simply by being dead. The hand has been made to *symbolize* the desire of the dead to return, to live, to be still among us, anywhere. The hand reaches out in the poem as a gesture that means something; the poet has made it a symbol of desire.

The whole array of dead bodies in the poem might be called symbolic as well. As a group, they stand for the war's human waste, and their dramatic presence provides the poem with a dramatic visualization of how war leaves no time for decency, not even the decency of burial. The bodies are a symbol: they stand for what the poem as a whole asserts.

The following poem also arises out of a historical moment. Here, however, the poet gives significance to a personal event by the interpretation he puts upon it.

JAMES DICKEY

The Leap

The only thing I have of Jane MacNaughton
 Is one instant of a dancing-class dance.
 She was the fastest runner in the seventh grade,
 My scrapbook says, even when boys were beginning
 5 To be as big as the girls,
 But I do not have her running in my mind,
 Though Frances Lane is there, Agnes Fraser,
 Fat Betty Lou Black in the boys-against-girls
 Relays we ran at recess: she must have run

- 10 Like the other girls, with her skirts tucked up
 So they would be like bloomers,
 But I cannot tell; that part of her is gone.
 What I do have is when she came,
 With the hem of her skirt where it should be
 15 For a young lady, into the annual dance
 Of the dancing class we all hated, and with a light

- Grave leap, jumped up and touched the end
Of one of the paper-ring decorations
- To see if she could reach it. She could,
20 And reached me now as well, hanging in my mind
From a brown chain of brittle paper, thin
And muscular, wide-mouthed, eager to prove
Whatever it proves when you leap
In a new dress, a new womanhood, among the boys
25 Whom you easily left in the dust
Of the passionless playground. If I said I saw
In the paper where Jane MacNaughton Hill,
- Mother of four, leapt to her death from a window
Of a downtown hotel, and that her body crushed-in
30 The top of a parked taxi, and that I held
Without trembling a picture of her lying cradled
In that papery steel as though lying in the grass,
One shoe idly off, arms folded across her breast,
I would not believe myself. I would say
35 The convenient thing, that it was a bad dream
Of maturity, to see that eternal process
Most obsessively wrong with the world
Come out of her light, earth-spurning feet
Grown heavy: would say that in the dusty heels
40 Of the playground some boy who did not depend
On speed of foot, caught and betrayed her.
Jane, stay where you are in my first mind:
It was odd in that school, at that dance.
I and the other slow-footed yokels sat in corners
45 Cutting rings out of drawing paper
- Before you leapt in your new dress
And touched the end of something I began,
Above the couples struggling on the floor,
New men and women clutching at each other
50 And prancing foolishly as bears: hold on
To that ring I made for you, Jane—
My feet are nailed to the ground
By dust I swallowed thirty years ago—
While I examine my hands.

1967

Memory is crucial to “The Leap.” The fact that Jane MacNaughton’s graceful leap in dancing class has stuck in the speaker’s mind all these years means that this leap was important to him, meant something to him, stood for something in his mind. For the speaker, the leap is an “instant” and the “only thing” he has of Jane. He remembers its grace and ease, and he struggles at several points to articulate its meaning (lines 16–26, 44–50), but even without articulation or explana-

tion it remains in his head as a visual memory, a symbol of something beyond himself, something he cannot do, something he wanted to be. What that leap stood for, or symbolized, was boldness, confidence, accomplishment, maturity, Jane's ability to go beyond her fellow students in dancing class—the transcending of childhood by someone entering adulthood. Her feet now seem “earth-spurning” (line 38) in that original leap, and they separate her from everyone else. Jane MacNaughton was beyond the speaker's abilities and any attempt he could make to articulate his hopes, but she was not beyond his dreams. And even before he could say so, she symbolized a dream.

The leap to her death seems cruelly wrong and ironic after the grace of her earlier leap. In memory she is suspended in air, as if there were no gravity, no coming back to earth, as if life could exist as dream. And so the photograph, re-created in precise detail, is a cruel dashing of the speaker's dream—a detailed record of the ending of a leap, a denial of the suspension in which his memory had held her. His dream is grounded; her mortality is insistent. But the speaker still wants to hang on to that symbolic moment (line 42), which he confronts in a more mature context but which he will never altogether replace or surrender.

The leap is ultimately symbolic in the *poem*, too, not just in the speaker's mind. In the poem (and for us as readers) its symbolism is double: the first leap symbolizes aspiration, and the second symbolizes the frustration and grounding of high hopes; the two are complementary, one impossible to imagine without the other. The poem is horrifying in some ways, a dramatic reminder that human beings don't ultimately transcend their mortality, their limits, no matter how heroic or unencumbered by gravity they may have seemed to an observer. But the poem is not altogether sad and despairing, partly because it still affirms the validity of the original leap and partly because it creates and elaborates another symbol: the paper chain.

The chain connects Jane to the speaker both literally and figuratively. It is, in part, *his* paper chain that she had leaped to touch in dancing class (lines 18–19), and he thinks of her first leap as “touch[ing] the end of something I began” (line 47). He and the other earthbound, “slow-footed yokels” (line 44) made the chain, and it connects them to her original leap, just as a photograph glimpsed in the paper connects the speaker to her second leap. The paper in the chain is “brittle” (line 21), and its creators seem dull artisans compared to the artistic performer that Jane was. They are heavy and “left in the dust” (lines 25, 52–53), but she is “light” (line 16) and able to transcend them, even in transcendence touching their lives and what they can do. And so the paper chain becomes the poem's symbol of linkage, connecting lower accomplishment to higher possibility, the artisan to the artist, material substance to the act of imagination. And at the end the speaker examines the hands that made the chain because those hands certify his connection to her and the imaginative leap she had made for him. The chain thus symbolizes not only the lower capabilities of those who cannot leap like the budding Jane could, but (later) the connection with her leap as both transcendence and mortality. Like the leap itself, the chain has been elevated to special meaning, given symbolic significance, by the poet's treatment of it. A leap and a chain have no necessary significance in themselves to most of us—at least no significance that we have all agreed upon—but they may take on significance in specific circumstances or a specific text.

Other objects and acts have a built-in significance because of past usage in literature, or tradition, or the stories a culture develops to explain itself and its

beliefs. Over the years some things have acquired an agreed-upon significance, an accepted value in our minds. They already stand for something before the poet cites them; they are **traditional symbols**. Their uses in poetry have to do with the fact that poets can count on a recognition of their traditional suggestions and meanings outside the poem, and the poem does not have to propose or argue a particular symbolic value. Birds, for example, traditionally symbolize flight, freedom from confinement, detachment from earthbound limits, the ability to soar beyond rationality and transcend mortal limits. Traditionally, birds have also been linked with imagination, especially poetic imagination, and poets often identify with them as pure and ideal singers of songs, as in Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale" (see chapter 21). One of the most traditional symbols, the rose, may be a simple and fairly plentiful flower in its season, but it has so long stood for particular qualities that merely to name it raises predictable expectations. Its beauty, delicacy, fragrance, shortness of life, and depth of color have made it a symbol of the transitoriness of beauty, and countless poets have counted on its accepted symbolism—sometimes to compliment a friend (as Burns does in "A Red, Red Rose") or sometimes to make a point about the nature of symbolism. The following poem draws, in quite a traditional way, on the traditional meanings.

EDMUND WALLER

Song

- Go, lovely rose!
 Tell her that wastes her time and me
 That now she knows,
 When I resemble² her to thee,
 5 How sweet and fair she seems to be.
- Tell her that's young,
 And shuns to have her graces spied,
 That hadst thou sprung
 In deserts, where no men abide,
 10 Thou must have uncommended died.
- Small is the worth
 Of beauty from the light retired;
 Bid her come forth,
 Suffer herself to be desired,
 15 And not blush so to be admired.
- Then die! that she
 The common fate of all things rare
 May read in thee;
 How small a part of time they share
 That are so wondrous sweet and fair!

2. Compare.

The speaker in “Song” sends the rose to his love in order to have it speak its traditional meanings of not only beauty but also transitoriness. He counts on accepted symbolism to make his point and hurry her into accepting his advances. Likewise, the poet does not elaborate or argue these things because he does not need to; he counts on the familiarity of the tradition (though, of course, readers unfamiliar with the tradition will not respond in the same way—that is one reason it is difficult to fully appreciate texts from another linguistic or cultural tradition).

Poets may use traditional symbols to invoke predictable responses—in effect using shortcuts to meaning by repeating acts of signification sanctioned by time and cultural habit. But often poets examine the tradition even as they employ it, and sometimes they revise or reverse meanings built into the tradition. Symbols do not necessarily stay the same over time, and poets often turn even the most traditional symbols to their own original uses. Knowing the traditions of poetry—reading a lot of poems and observing how they tend to use certain words, metaphors, and symbols—can be very useful in reading new poems, but traditions evolve and individual poems do highly individual things. Knowing the past never means being able to interpret new texts with confidence. Symbolism makes things happen, but individual poets and texts determine what will happen and how. The following two poems work important variations on the traditional associations of roses:

D. H. LAWRENCE

I Am Like a Rose

I am myself at last; now I achieve
My very self. I, with the wonder mellow,
Full of fine warmth, I issue forth in clear
And single me, perfected from my fellow.

- 5 Here I am all myself. No rose-bush heaving
Its limpid sap to culmination has brought
Itself more sheer and naked out of the green
In stark-clear roses, than I to myself am brought.

1917

DOROTHY PARKER

One Perfect Rose

A single flow'r he sent me, since we met.
All tenderly his messenger he chose;
Deep-hearted, pure, with scented dew still wet—
One perfect rose.

- 5 I knew the language of the floweret;
 “My fragile leaves,” it said, “his heart enclose.”
 Love long has taken for his amulet
 One perfect rose.
- Why is it no one ever sent me yet
 10 One perfect limousine, do you suppose?
 Ah no, it’s always just my luck to get
 One perfect rose.

1937

Sometimes symbols—traditional or not—become so insistent in the world of a poem that the larger referential world is left almost totally behind. In such cases the symbol is everything, and the poem does not just *use* symbols but becomes a **symbolic poem**, usually a highly individualized one dependent on an internal system introduced by the individual poet.

Here is an example of such a poem:

WILLIAM BLAKE

*The Sick Rose*³

- O rose, thou art sick.
 The invisible worm
 That flies in the night
 In the howling storm
- 5 Has found out thy bed
 Of crimson joy,
 And his dark secret love
 Does thy life destroy.

1794

The poem does not seem to be about a rose, but about what the rose represents—not in this case something altogether understandable through the traditional meanings of *rose*.

We usually associate the rose with beauty and love, often with sex; and here several key terms have sexual connotations: “worm,” “bed,” and “crimson joy.” The violation of the rose by the worm is the poem’s main concern; the violation seems to have involved secrecy, deceit, and “dark” motives, and the result is sickness rather than the joy of love. The poem is sad; it involves a sense of hurt and tragedy, nearly of despair. The poem cries out against the misuse of the rose,

3. In Renaissance emblem books, the scarab beetle, worm, and rose are closely associated: the beetle feeds on dung, and the smell of the rose is fatal to it.

against its desecration, implying that instead of a healthy joy in sensuality and sexuality, there has been in this case destruction and hurt, perhaps because of misunderstanding and repression and lack of sensitivity.

But to say so much about this poem we have to extrapolate from other poems by Blake, and we have to introduce information from outside the poem. Fully symbolic poems often require that, and thus they ask us to go beyond the formal procedures of reading that we have discussed so far. As presented in this poem, the rose is not part of the normal world that we ordinarily see, and it is symbolic in a special sense. The poet does not simply take an object from our everyday world and give it special significance, making it a symbol in the same sense that the leap or the corpse's hand is a symbol. Here the rose seems to belong to its own world, a world made entirely inside the poem or the poet's head. The rose is not referential, or not primarily so. The whole poem is symbolic; it is not paraphrasable; it lives in its own world. But what is the rose here a symbol of? In general terms, we can say from what the poem tells us; but we may not be as confident as we can be in the more nearly recognizable world of "The Leap" or "Leningrad Cemetery, Winter of 1941." In "The Sick Rose," it seems inappropriate to ask the standard questions: What rose? Where? Which worm? What are the particulars here? In the world of this poem worms can fly and may be invisible. We are altogether in a world of meanings that have been formulated according to a special system of knowledge and code of belief. We will feel comfortable and confident in that world only if we read many poems written by the poet (in this case William Blake) within the same symbolic system.

Negotiation of meanings in symbolic poems can be very difficult indeed. Reading symbolic poems is an advanced skill that depends on special knowledge of authors and of the special traditions they work from. But usually the symbols you will find in poems *are* referential of meanings we all share and you can readily discover these meanings by carefully studying the poems themselves.

• • •

ROBERT FROST

Fireflies in the Garden

Here come real stars to fill the upper skies,
 And here on earth come emulating flies,
 That though they never equal stars in size,
 (And they were never really stars at heart)
 5 Achieve at times a very star-like start.
 Only, of course, they can't sustain the part.

1928

- What is the tone of this poem? What does the poem say about the limits of symbolism?

ADRIENNE RICH

*Diving into the Wreck*

- First having read the book of myths,
 and loaded the camera,
 and checked the edge of the knife-blade,
 I put on
 5 the body-armor of black rubber
 the absurd flippers
 the grave and awkward mask.
 I am having to do this
 not like Cousteau⁴ with his
 10 assiduous team
 aboard the sun-flooded schooner
 but here alone.

 There is a ladder.
 The ladder is always there
 15 hanging innocently
 close to the side of the schooner.
 We know what it is for,
 we who have used it.
 Otherwise
 20 it's a piece of maritime floss
 some sundry equipment.

 I go down.
 Rung after rung and still
 the oxygen immerses me
 25 the blue light
 the clear atoms
 of our human air.
 I go down.
 My flippers cripple me,
 30 I crawl like an insect down the ladder
 and there is no one
 to tell me when the ocean
 will begin.

 First the air is blue and then
 35 it is bluer and then green and then
 black I am blacking out and yet
 my mask is powerful
 it pumps my blood with power
 the sea is another story
 40 the sea is not a question of power

4. Jacques-Yves Cousteau (1910–1997), French underwater explorer and writer.

I have to learn alone
to turn my body without force
in the deep element.

And now: it is easy to forget
45 what I came for
among so many who have always
lived here
swaying their crenellated fans
between the reefs
50 and besides
you breathe differently down here.

I came to explore the wreck.
The words are purposes.
The words are maps.
55 I came to see the damage that was done
and the treasures that prevail.
I stroke the beam of my lamp
slowly along the flank
of something more permanent
60 than fish or weed

the thing I came for:
the wreck and not the story of the wreck
the thing itself and not the myth
the drowned face always staring
65 toward the sun
the evidence of damage
worn by salt and sway into this threadbare beauty
the ribs of the disaster
curving their assertion
70 among the tentative haunters.

This is the place.
And I am here, the mermaid whose dark hair
streams black, the merman in his armored body
We circle silently
75 about the wreck
we dive into the hold.
I am she: I am he

whose drowned face sleeps with open eyes
whose breasts still bear the stress
80 whose silver, copper, vermeil cargo lies
obscurely inside barrels
half-wedged and left to rot
we are the half-destroyed instruments
that once held to a course
85 the water-eaten log
the fouled compass

We are, I am, you are
 by cowardice or courage
 the one who find our way
 90 back to this scene
 carrying a knife, a camera
 a book of myths
 in which
 our names do not appear.

1972

1973

- What word or phrase first signals the reader that “Diving into the Wreck” is to be understood symbolically, not literally? What are some possible symbolic interpretations of the wreck and the dive?

ROO BORSON

After a Death

Seeing that there's no other way,
 I turn his absence into a chair.
 I can sit in it,
 gaze out through the window.
 5 I can do what I do best
 and then go out into the world.
 And I can return then with my useless love,
 to rest,
 because the chair is there.

1989

- Why do you think the speaker chooses to symbolize her absent loved one with a chair?

SUGGESTIONS FOR WRITING

1. Choose one poem you have read in this book in which a single word seems crucial to that poem's total effect. Write an essay in which you work out carefully how the poem's meaning and tone depend on that one word.
2. Compare Dickinson's "I dwell in Possibility—" and "Wild Nights—Wild Nights!" (both in this chapter). What patterns of word use do you see in the two poems? What kinds of vocabulary do they have in common? Syntax? Strategies of organization? Find other poems by Dickinson (there are a number in this book) and look for similar patterns of thought and language. What might her poems be like if they were written “normally”? Write an essay in which you explore Dickinson's unique poetic style.
3. Consider the poems about roses found in this chapter and write a paragraph about each poem showing how it establishes specific symbolism for the rose. What gen-

eralizations can you draw about the rose's traditional meanings in poetry? If you can, find other poems about roses outside of this book to determine if your generalizations still apply.

4. Research the design of World War II bombers like the B-17 and the B-24. Try to find a picture of the gunner in the ball turret of such an airplane, and note carefully his body position. Write an essay in which you explain how Randall Jarrell's "The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner" uses visual details to create its fetal and birth metaphors.
5. Is there a "correct" interpretation of Adrienne Rich's "Diving into the Wreck"? If one interpretation seems to fit all the particulars of the poem, does that mean it's better than other possible interpretations? Write an essay in which you explore the poem's symbolism and argue for or against the idea that there is a single best way to understand this poem. Can ambiguity serve a poet's purpose, or does it ultimately undercut a poem's meaning and significance?