

Exploring Contexts

20 READING POETRY IN CONTEXT

The more you know, the better a reader of poetry you will likely be. And that means general knowledge as well as knowledge of other poetry and literary traditions. Poems often draw on a large fund of human knowledge about all sorts of things, asking us to regard a poem in light of facts and values we have taken on from earlier reading or from our experiences in the world. In the previous nine chapters, we have looked at how practice and specific skills make interpretation easier and better; in this “contextual” section we shift our focus to information you need to read richly and fully: information about authors, about events that influenced them or inspired their writing, and about literary traditions that provide a context for their work. Poets always write in a specific time, under unique circumstances, and with some awareness of the world around them, whether or not they explicitly refer to contemporary matters in a particular poem. In this chapter, we will discuss the cultural and historical events, movements, and ideas that directly influence poets or that poets in some way represent in the poems they write.

Very little that you know will ultimately go to waste in your reading of poetry. The best potential reader of poetry has already read widely and thought deeply about all kinds of things, and is supremely wise—wise enough to know exactly how to apply specific knowledge to a given text. We all strive to be that ideal reader, but none of us can fully measure up. Of course, no poet really expects any reader to be perfect, but poems themselves can make special demands: they may require readers to know as much about history, for example, as about the intricacies of language and form. Poems not only *refer* to people, places, and events—things that exist in time—but they also are reflections of given moments, products of both the potentialities and the limitations of the times in which they are created.

Things that happen every day often find their way into poetry in a natural and yet forceful manner. Making love in a junkyard, as in Dickey’s “Cherrylog Road” (chapter 14) is a good example; a reader doesn’t need to know what particular junkyard was involved—or imaginatively involved—in order to understand the poem, but that reader does need to know what an auto junkyard was like in the mid-twentieth century, with more or less whole car bodies in various states of disintegration roughly arrayed on a large plot of ground. But what if, over the next generation or two, junkyards completely disappear as we find other ways to dispose of old cars? Already, especially in large cities, many old cars are crushed into small metal blocks. But what if the metal is all melted down, or the junk is blasted into space? If that should happen, readers then may have never seen a junkyard, and they will need a footnote to explain what junkyards were like. The history of junkyards will not be lost—people will have pictures, films, and books about the forms and functions of junkyards, probably even the fact that lovers

occasionally visited them—but the public memory of junkyards will soon disappear. No social customs, nothing that is made, no institutions or sites can last forever.

Readers may still be able to experience “Cherrylog Road” when junkyards disappear, but they will need some help, and they may think its particulars a little quaint, much as we regard a story that involves a horse and buggy—or even making love in the back-seat of a parked car—as quaint now. Institutions change, habits change, times change, places and settings change—all kinds of particulars change, even when people’s wants, needs, and foibles go on in pretty much the same way. Footnotes never provide a precise or adequate substitute for firsthand knowledge, but they can help our understanding and pave the way for feeling. With the aid of footnotes, poems from earlier times can stimulate in readers a kind of imaginative historical sympathy, for poems that refer to specific contemporary details (which have now become to us, in our own time, *historical* details) often describe human nature and human experiences very much as we still know and live them. Today’s poem may need tomorrow’s footnote, but the poem need not be tomorrow’s puzzle—or just a curiosity or fossil.

The following poem, not that many years old, already requires some explanation. Many readers will not know the factual details of the event that occasioned it, and (even more important) most readers will not recall the powerful reaction throughout the United States to the event.

JAMES A. EMANUEL

*Emmett Till*¹

I hear a whistling
Through the water.
Little Emmett
Won’t be still.
5 He keeps floating
Round the darkness,
Edging through
The silent chill.
Tell me, please,
10 That bedtime story
Of the fairy
River Boy
Who swims forever,
Deep in treasures,
15 Necklaced in
A coral toy.

1968

1. In 1955, Till, a black fourteen-year-old from Chicago, was lynched in Mississippi for allegedly making sexual advances toward a white woman.

How do you know what you need to know? The easiest clue is your own puzzlement. When something that you don't recognize happens in a poem—and yet the poem seems not to clarify it—you have a clue that readers at the time the poem was written must have recognized something that is not now common knowledge. Once you know you don't know, it takes only a little work to find out: most college libraries (and, of course, the Internet) contain far more information than you will ever need, and the trick is to search efficiently. Your ability to find the information will depend upon how well you know the printed reference materials and digital resources available to you. Practice helps. Knowledge accumulates. Most poems printed in textbooks like this one will be annotated for you with basic facts, but often you will need additional information before you can interpret a poem's full meaning and feel its resonance. An editor, trying to satisfy the needs of a variety of readers, may not always write the note you particularly need, so you may have to do some digging in the library for the sake of fully appreciating any poem you read—certainly for those you come upon in old magazines and unannotated collections. Few poets like to annotate their own work (they'd rather let you work a little to appreciate it), and besides, many things that now need notes didn't when they were written.

The two poems that follow both require from the reader some specific “referential” information, but they differ considerably in their emphasis on the particularities of time and place. The first poem concerns a moment just before the outbreak of World War I when British naval forces were preparing for combat by taking gunnery practice in the English Channel. The second represents a longer cultural moment in which attitudes and assumptions, rather than a specific event, are at stake.

THOMAS HARDY

Channel Firing

That night your great guns, unawares,
Shook all our coffins as we lay,
And broke the chancel window squares,²
We thought it was the Judgment-day

- 5 And sat upright. While drearishome
Arose the howl of wakened hounds:
The mouse let fall the altar-crumbs,³
The worms drew back into the mounds,
The glebe cow⁴ drooled. Till God called, “No;
10 It's gunnery practice out at sea
Just as before you went below;
The world is as it used to be:

2. The windows near the altar in a church. 3. Breadcrumbs from the sacrament of Communion.
4. Parish cow pastured on the meadow next to the churchyard.

“All nations striving strong to make
 Red war yet redder. Mad as hatters
 15 They do no more for Christ’s sake
 Than you who are helpless in such matters.

“That this is not the judgment-hour
 For some of them’s a blessed thing,
 For if it were they’d have to scour
 20 Hell’s floor for so much threatening . . .

“Ha, ha. It will be warmer when
 I blow the trumpet (if indeed
 I ever do; for you are men,
 And rest eternal sorely need).”

25 So down we lay again. “I wonder,
 Will the world ever saner be,”
 Said one, “than when He sent us under
 In our indifferent century!”

And many a skeleton shook his head.
 30 “Instead of preaching forty year,”
 My neighbor Parson Thirdly said,
 “I wish I had stuck to pipes and beer.”

Again the guns disturbed the hour,
 Roaring their readiness to avenge.
 35 As far inland as Stourton Tower,
 And Camelot, and starlit Stonehenge.⁵

April 1914

SANDRA GILBERT

Sonnet: The Ladies’ Home Journal

The brilliant stills of food, the cozy
 glossy, bygone life—mashed potatoes
 posing as whipped cream, a neat mom
 conjuring shapes from chaos, trimming the flame—
 5 how we ached for all that,
 that dance of love in the living room,
 those paneled walls, that kitchen golden
 as the inside of a seed: how we leaned

5. A circular formation of upright stones dating from about 1600 B.C.E. on Salisbury Plain, Wiltshire; it is thought to have been a ceremonial site for political and religious occasions or perhaps an early astronomical observatory. *Stourton Tower*: a monument in Stourhead Park, Wiltshire, built in the eighteenth century to commemorate King Alfred’s ninth-century victory over the Danes. *Camelot*: the legendary site of King Arthur’s court, said to have been in Cornwall or Somerset.

on those shiny columns of advice,
 10 stroking the *thank yous*, the firm thighs, the wise
 closets full of soap.

But even then
 we knew it was the lies we loved, the lies
 we wore like Dior coats,⁶ the clean-cut airtight
 lies that laid out our lives in black and white.

1984

"Channel Firing" is not ultimately *about* World War I, for it presumes that human behavior stays the same from age to age, but it begins from a particular historical vantage point. The composition date was recorded by the author on the manuscript and is considered part of the poem, but even with that clue a reader would not be able to make much sense of the poem without recognizing the specific reference—the dramatic situation here (with a waking corpse as the main speaker) is difficult enough to sort out. The firing of the guns has awakened the dead who are buried near the channel, and in their puzzlement they assume it is Judgment Day, time for them to arise, until God enters and tells them what is happening. Much of the poem's effect depends on character portrayal—a God who laughs and sounds cynical, a parson who regrets his selfless life and wishes he had indulged himself more—as well as the sense that nothing ever changes. But particularity of time and place is crucial to this sense of changelessness; even so important a contemporary moment as the beginning of a world war—a moment viewed by most people at the time as unique and world-changing—fades into a timeless parade of moments that stretches over centuries of history. The geographical particulars cited at the end—as the sound of the guns moves inland to be heard in place after place—make the same point. Great moments in history are all encompassed in the sound of the guns and its message about human behavior. Times, places, and events, however important they seem, all become part of some larger pattern that denies individuality or uniqueness.

The particulars in "Sonnet: The Ladies' Home Journal" work differently—not to remind us of a specific time that readers need to identify but to characterize a way of seeing and thinking. The referentiality here is more cultural than historical; it is based more on ideas and attitudes characteristic of a particular period than on a specific moment or location. The pictures in the *Ladies' Home Journal* stand for a whole way of thinking about women that was characteristic of the time—the mid-twentieth century—when this popular magazine flourished. The poem implicitly contrasts the "lies" (line 13) of the magazine with the truth of the present—that women's lives and values don't reside in some fantasized sense of beautiful food, motherhood, social rituals, and commercial products. Two vastly different cultural attitudes—that of the poem's present, with its skeptical view of women's traditional roles, and that of a past in which carefully posed glossy photographs represented an idealized womanhood—are at the heart of the poem. Readers need to know what the *Ladies' Home Journal* was like generally in order to understand the poem; we do not need to know the date or contents of a specific issue, only

6. Designer coats by Christian Dior.

that this magazine reflected the attitudes and values of a whole age and culture. The referentiality here involves information about ideas and consciousness—about cultural attitudes and their effects on actual human beings—more than the specifics of time and event.

To get at appropriate factual, cultural, and historical information, we need to ask three kinds of questions. One is obvious: it is the “Do I understand the reference to . . . ?” kind. When events, places, or people unfamiliar to you come up, you will need to find out what, where, or who they are. The second kind of question is more difficult: How do you know, in a poem that does *not* refer specifically to events, people, or ideas that you do not recognize, that you *need* to know more? When a poem has no specific references to look up, no people or events to identify, how do you know that it has a specific context? To deal with this sort of question, you have to trust two people: the poet and yourself. Usually, good poets will not puzzle you more than necessary, so you can safely assume that something not self-explanatory will merit close attention and possibly some digging in the library. (Poets do make mistakes and miscalculations about their readers, but at first we should assume they know what they are doing and why they are doing it.) References that are not in themselves clear provide a strong clue that you need more information. And so you need to trust yourself: when something doesn’t click, when the information given you does not seem enough, you need to trust your puzzlement and try to find the missing facts that will allow the poem to make sense. But how? Often the date of the poem helps; sometimes the title gives a clue or a point of departure; sometimes you can uncover, by reading about the author, some of the things he or she was interested in or concerned about. There is no single all-purpose way to discover what to look for, but that kind of research—looking for clues, adding up the evidence—can be interesting in itself and very rewarding when it is successful. Meanwhile, the third question, for every factual reference, is *Why*? Why does the poem refer to this particular person instead of some other? What function does the reference serve?

Beyond simply understanding that a particular poem is about an event or place or idea, you often must develop a full sense of historical context, a sense of the larger significance and resonance of the historical background. A poem may expect you to already have some sense of that significance; just as often the poem works to educate you further, both in your understanding and also on the level of feeling.

What we need to bring to our reading varies from poem to poem. For example, Wilfred Owen’s “Dulce et Decorum Est” (in this chapter) needs our knowledge that poison gas was used in World War I; the green tint through which the speaker sees the world in lines 13–14 comes from the green glass in the goggles of the gas mask he has just put on. But some broader issues matter as well, such as the climate of opinion that surrounded the war. To idealists, it would become “the war to end all wars,” and many soldiers—as well as politicians and propagandists—considered it a sacred mission, regarding the threat of Germany’s expansionist policy as dangerous to Western civilization itself. No doubt you will read the poem more intelligently—and with more feeling—the more you know about the context, and the same is true of any poem conscious of its cultural or historical basis. But at the same time, your sense of these subjects will grow as a result of reading sensitively and thoughtfully the poems themselves. Facts are no substitute for skills. Once you have read each of the poems in this section, try taking a breather; and then in one sitting read them all again. Reading poetry can be a form of

gaining knowledge as well as an aesthetic experience. Although we don't generally turn to poetry for information as such, poems often give us more than we expect. The ways to wisdom are paved with facts, and although poetry is not primarily a means of transmitting facts, it often requires us to be aware, sometimes in detail, of its context in the real world.

TIMES, PLACES, AND EVENTS

MILLER WILLIAMS

Thinking about Bill, Dead of AIDS

We did not know the first thing about
how blood surrenders to even the smallest threat
when old allergies turn inside out,

the body rescinding all its normal orders
5 to all defenders of flesh, betraying the head,
pulling its guards back from all its borders.

Thinking of friends afraid to shake your hand,
we think of your hand shaking, your mouth set,
your eyes drained of any reprimand.

10 Loving, we kissed you, partly to persuade
both you and us, seeing what eyes had said,
that we were loving and were not afraid.

If we had had more, we would have given more.
As it was we stood next to your bed,
15 stopping, though, to set our smiles at the door.

Not because we were less sure at the last.
Only because, not knowing anything yet,
we didn't know what look would hurt you least.

1989

IRVING LAYTON

From Colony to Nation

A dull people,
but the rivers of this country
are wide and beautiful

A dull people
 5 enamoured of childish games,
 but food is easily come by
 and plentiful

Some with a priest's voice
 in their cage of ribs: but
 10 on high mountain-tops and in thunderstorms
 the chirping is not heard

Deferring to beadle and censor;
 not ashamed for this,
 but given over to horseplay,
 15 the making of money

A dull people, without charm or
 ideas,
 settling into the clean empty look
 of a Mountie or dairy farmer
 20 as into a legacy

One can ignore them
 (the silences, the vast distances help)
 and suppose them at the bottom
 of one of the meaner lakes,
 25 their bones not even picked for souvenirs.

1956

LANGSTON HUGHES

Harlem

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up
 like a raisin in the sun?
 Or fester like a sore—
 5 And then run?
 Does it stink like rotten meat?
 Or crust and sugar over—
 like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags
 10 like a heavy load.

Or does it explode?

1951

ROBERT HAYDEN

Frederick Douglass

- When it is finally ours, this freedom,¹ this liberty, this beautiful
 and terrible thing, needful to man as air,
 usable as earth; when it belongs at last to all,
 when it is truly instinct, brain matter, diastole, systole,
 5 reflex action; when it is finally won; when it is more
 than the gaudy mumbo jumbo of politicians:
 this man, this Douglass, this former slave, this Negro
 beaten to his knees, exiled, visioning a world
 where none is lonely, none hunted, alien,
 10 this man, superb in love and logic, this man
 shall be remembered. Oh, not with statues' rhetoric,
 not with legends and poems and wreaths of bronze alone,
 but with the lives grown out of his life, the lives
 fleshing his dream of the beautiful, needful thing.

1966



FELICIA DOROTHEA HEMANS

*Casabianca*²

- The boy stood on the burning deck
 Whence all but he had fled;
 The flame that lit the battle's wreck
 Shone round him o'er the dead.
- 5 Yet beautiful and bright he stood,
 As born to rule the storm;
 A creature of heroic blood,
 A proud, though childlike form.
- The flames roll'd on—he would not go
 10 Without his father's word;
 That father, faint in death below,
 His voice no longer heard.
- He call'd aloud:—"Say, Father, say
 If yet my task is done?"

1. Frederick Douglass (1817–1895), an escaped slave, was involved in the Underground Railroad and became publisher of the famous abolitionist newspaper the *North Star*, in Rochester, New York.

2. Young Casabianca, a boy about thirteen years old, son to the Admiral of the *Orient*, remained at his post (in the Battle of the Nile [1798]) after the ship had taken fire, and all the guns had been abandoned; and perished in the explosion of the vessel, when the flames had reached the powder [Hemans's note].

- 15 He knew not that the chieftain lay
 Unconscious of his son.
- “Speak, Father!” once again he cried,
 “If I may yet be gone!”
 And but the booming shots replied,
 20 And fast the flames roll’d on.
- Upon his brow he felt their breath,
 And in his waving hair,
 And look’d from that lone post of death
 In still, yet brave despair.
- 25 And shouted but once more aloud,
 “My Father! must I stay?”
 While o’er him fast, through sail and shroud,
 The wreathing fires made way.
- They wrapt the ship in splendor wild,
 30 They caught the flag on high,
 And stream’d above the gallant child,
 Like banners in the sky.
- There came a burst of thunder sound—
 The boy—oh! where was he?
 35 Ask of the winds that far around
 With fragments strew’d the sea!—
- With mast, and helm, and pennon fair,
 That well had borne their part,
 But the noblest thing which perish’d there
 40 Was that young faithful heart

1829

ELIZABETH BISHOP

Casabianca

- Love’s the boy stood on the burning deck
 trying to recite “The boy stood on
 the burning deck.” Love’s the son
 stood stammering elocution
 5 while the poor ship in flames went down.
- Love’s the obstinate boy, the ship,
 even the swimming sailors, who
 would like a schoolroom platform, too,
 or an excuse to stay
 10 on deck. And love’s the burning boy.

1946

WILFRED OWEN

*Dulce et Decorum Est*³

- Bent double, like old beggars under sacks,
 Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed through sludge,
 Till on the haunting flares we turned our backs
 And towards our distant rest began to trudge.
- 5 Men marched asleep. Many had lost their boots
 But limped on, blood-shod. All went lame; all blind;
 Drunk with fatigue; deaf even to the hoots
 Of disappointed shells that dropped behind.
- Gas! Gas! Quick, boys!—An ecstasy of fumbling,
 10 Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time;
 But someone still was yelling out and stumbling
 And floundering like a man in fire or lime.—
 Dim, through the misty panes and thick green light
 As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.
- 15 In all my dreams, before my helpless sight,
 He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.
- If in some smothering dreams you too could pace
 Behind the wagon that we flung him in,
 And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,
 20 His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin;
 If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood
 Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,
 Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud
 Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,—
- 25 My friend, you would not tell with such high zest
 To children ardent for some desperate glory,
 The old Lie: *Dulce et decorum est*
Pro patria mori.

1917

3. Part of a phrase from Horace (Roman poet and satirist, 65–8 B.C.E.), quoted in full in the last lines: “It is sweet and proper to die for one’s country.”

DUDLEY RANDALL

*Ballad of Birmingham**(On the bombing of a church in Birmingham, Alabama, 1963)*

“Mother dear, may I go downtown
 Instead of out to play,
 And march the streets of Birmingham
 In a Freedom March today?”

- 5 “No, baby, no, you may not go,
 For the dogs are fierce and wild,
 And clubs and hoses, guns and jails
 Aren’t good for a little child.”

- “But, mother, I won’t be alone.
 10 Other children will go with me,
 And march the streets of Birmingham
 To make our country free.”

- “No, baby, no, you may not go,
 For I fear those guns will fire.
 15 But you may go to church instead
 And sing in the children’s choir.”

- She has combed and brushed her night-dark hair,
 And bathed rose petal sweet,
 And drawn white gloves on her small brown hands,
 20 And white shoes on her feet.

The mother smiled to know her child
 Was in the sacred place,
 But that smile was the last smile
 To come upon her face.

- 25 For when she heard the explosion,
 Her eyes grew wet and wild.
 She raced through the streets of Birmingham
 Calling for her child.

- She clawed through bits of glass and brick,
 30 Then lifted out a shoe.
 “Oh, here’s the shoe my baby wore,
 But, baby, where are you?”

1969

CONSTRUCTING IDENTITY, EXPLORING GENDER

ELIZABETH BISHOP

Exchanging Hats

- Unfunny uncles who insist
 in trying on a lady's hat,
 —oh, even if the joke falls flat,
 we share your slight transvestite twist
- 5 in spite of our embarrassment.
 Costume and custom are complex.
 The headgear of the other sex
 inspires us to experiment.
- Anandrous¹ aunts, who, at the beach
 10 with paper plates upon your laps,
 keep putting on the yachtsmen's caps
 with exhibitionistic screech,
- the visors hanging o'er the ear
 so that the golden anchors drag,
 15 —the tides of fashion never lag.
 Such caps may not be worn next year.
- Or you who don the paper plate
 itself, and put some grapes upon it,
 or sport the Indian's feather bonnet,
 20 —perversities may aggravate
- the natural madness of the hatter.
 And if the opera hats collapse
 and crowns grow drafty, then, perhaps,
 he thinks what might a miter matter?
- 25 Unfunny uncle, you who wore a
 hat too big, or one too many,
 tell us, can't you, are there any
 stars inside your black fedora?
- Aunt exemplary and slim,
 30 with avernal² eyes, we wonder
 what slow changes they see under
 their vast, shady, turned-down brim.

1956

1. Literally, "husbandless." 2. Infernal.

MARIE HOWE

Practicing

I want to write a love poem for the girls I kissed in seventh grade,
a song for what we did on the floor in the basement

of somebody's parents' house, a hymn for what we didn't say but
thought:

That feels good or *I like that*, when we learned how to open each other's
mouths

how to move our tongues to make somebody moan. We called it
5 practicing, and

one was the boy, and we paired off—maybe six or eight girls—and
turned out

the lights and kissed and kissed until we were stoned on kisses, and
lifted our

nightgowns or let the straps drop, and, Now you be the boy:

concrete floor, sleeping bag or couch, playroom, game room, train room,
laundry.

10 Linda's basement was like a boat with booths and portholes

instead of windows. Gloria's father had a bar downstairs with stools
that spun,

plush carpeting. We kissed each other's throats.

We sucked each other's breasts, and we left marks, and never spoke of it
upstairs

outdoors, in daylight, not once. We did it, and it was

practicing, and slept, sprawled so our legs still locked or crossed, a hand
15 still lost

in someone's hair . . . and we grew up and hardly mentioned who

the first kiss really was—a girl like us, still sticky with the moisturizer
we'd

shared in the bathroom. I want to write a song

for that thick silence in the dark, and the first pure thrill of unreluctant
desire,

20 just before we made ourselves stop.

1998

RICHARD LOVELACE

Song: To Lucasta, Going to the Wars

Tell me not, sweet, I am unkind,
 That from the nunnery
 Of thy chaste breast and quiet mind
 To war and arms I fly.

- 5 True: a new mistress now I chase,
 The first foe in the field;
 And with a stronger faith embrace
 A sword, a horse, a shield.

- Yet this inconstancy is such
 10 As you too shall adore;
 I could not love thee, dear, so much,
 Loved I not honor more.

1649

ROBERT BROWNING

*My Last Duchess*Ferrara³

- That's my last Duchess painted on the wall,
 Looking as if she were alive. I call
 That piece a wonder, now: Frà Pandolf's hands⁴
 Worked busily a day, and there she stands.
 5 Will't please you sit and look at her? I said
 "Frà Pandolf" by design, for never read
 Strangers like you that pictured countenance,
 The depth and passion of its earnest glance,
 But to myself they turned (since none puts by
 10 The curtain I have drawn for you, but I)
 And seemed as they would ask me, if they durst,
 How such a glance came there; so, not the first
 Are you to turn and ask thus. Sir, 'twas not
 Her husband's presence only, called that spot
 15 Of joy into the Duchess' cheek: perhaps

3. Alfonso II, duke of Ferrara in Italy in the mid-sixteenth century, is the presumed speaker of the poem, which is loosely based on historical events. The duke's first wife—whom he had married when she was fourteen—died under suspicious circumstances at seventeen, and he then negotiated through an agent (to whom the poem is spoken) for the hand of the niece of the count of Tyrol in Austria.

4. Frà Pandolf is, like Claus (line 56), fictitious.

- Frà Pandolf chanced to say "Her mantle laps
 Over my lady's wrist too much," or "Paint
 Must never hope to reproduce the faint
 Half-flush that dies along her throat": such stuff
 20 Was courtesy, she thought, and cause enough
 For calling up that spot of joy. She had
 A heart—how shall I say?—too soon made glad,
 Too easily impressed; she liked whate'er
 She looked on, and her looks went everywhere.
- 25 Sir, 'twas all one! My favor at her breast,
 The dropping of the daylight in the West,
 The bough of cherries some officious fool
 Broke in the orchard for her, the white mule
 She rode with round the terrace—all and each
 30 Would draw from her alike the approving speech,
 Or blush, at least. She thanked men,—good! but thanked
 Somehow—I know not how—as if she ranked
 My gift of a nine-hundred-years-old name
 With anybody's gift. Who'd stoop to blame
 35 This sort of trifling? Even had you skill
 In speech—which I have not—to make your will
 Quite clear to such an one, and say, "Just this
 Or that in you disgusts me; here you miss,
 Or there exceed the mark"—and if she let
 40 Herself be lessoned so, nor plainly set
 Her wits to yours, forsooth, and made excuse,
 —E'en then would be some stooping; and I choose
 Never to stoop. Oh sir, she smiled, no doubt,
 Whene'er I passed her; but who passed without
 45 Much the same smile? This grew; I gave commands;
 Then all smiles stopped together. There she stands
 As if alive. Will't please you rise? We'll meet
 The company below, then. I repeat,
 The Count your master's known munificence
 50 Is ample warrant that no just pretense
 Of mine for dowry will be disallowed;
 Though his fair daughter's self, as I avowed
 At starting, is my object. Nay, we'll go
 Together down, sir. Notice Neptune, though,
 55 Taming a sea-horse, thought a rarity,
 Which Claus of Innsbruck cast in bronze for me!

ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING

To George Sand

A Desire

- Thou large-brained woman and large-hearted man,
 Self-called George Sand⁵ whose soul, amid the lions
 Of thy tumultuous senses, moans defiance
 And answers roar for roar, as spirits can:
- 5 I would some mild miraculous thunder ran
 Above the applauded circus,⁶ in appliance
 Of thine own nobler nature's strength and science,
 Drawing two pinions, white as wings of swan,
 From thy strong shoulders, to amaze the place
- 10 With holier light! that thou to woman's claim
 And man's, mightst join beside the angel's grace
 Of a pure genius sanctified from blame,
 Till child and maiden pressed to thine embrace
 To kiss upon thy lips a stainless fame.

1844

To George Sand

A Recognition

- True genius, but true woman! dost deny
 The woman's nature with a manly scorn,
 And break away the gauds and armlets worn
 By weaker women in captivity?
- 5 Ah, vain denial! that revolted cry
 Is sobbed in by a woman's voice forlorn,—
 Thy woman's hair, my sister, all unshorn
 Floats back dishevelled strength in agony,
 Disproving thy man's name: and while before
- 10 The world thou burnest in a poet-fire,
 We see thy woman-heart beat evermore
 Through the large flame. Beat purer, heart, and higher,
 Till God unsex thee on the heavenly shore
 Where unincarnate spirits purely aspire!

1844

5. Pseudonym of Amandine-Aurore-Lucie (or -Lucille) Dupin, baronne Dudevant (1804-1876), French Romantic novelist, famous for her unconventional ideas and behavior.

6. Roman spectacle involving gladiatorial games, brutal athletic contests, and the killing of Christian slaves by lions.

LADY MARY WORTLEY MONTAGU

Written the First Year I Was Marry'd

- While thirst of power, and desire of fame,
 In every age is every woman's aim;
 Of beauty vain, of silly toasters proud,
 Fond of a train, and happy in a crowd,
 5 On every fop bestowing a kind glance,
 Each conquest owing to some loose advance,
 Affect to fly, in hopes to be persu'd,
 And think they're virtuous, if not grossly lewd:
 Let this sure maxim be my virtue's guide, }
 10 In part to blame she is, who has been try'd; }
 Too near he has approach'd, who is deny'd. }

1712-13

MARGE PIERCY

What's That Smell in the Kitchen?

- All over America women are burning dinners.
 It's lambchops in Peoria; it's haddock
 in Providence; it's steak in Chicago;
 tofu delight in Big Sur; red
 5 rice and beans in Dallas.
 All over America women are burning
 food they're supposed to bring with calico
 smile on platters glittering like wax.
 Anger sputters in her brainpan, confined
 10 but spewing out missiles of hot fat.
 Carbonized despair presses like a clinker
 from a barbecue against the back of her eyes.
 If she wants to grill anything, it's
 her husband spitted over a slow fire.
 15 If she wants to serve him anything
 it's a dead rat with a bomb in its belly
 ticking like the heart of an insomniac.
 Her life is cooked and digested,
 nothing but leftovers in Tupperware.
 20 Look, she says, once I was roast duck
 on your platter with parsley but now I am Spam.
 Burning dinner is not incompetence but war.

1983

PAULETTE JILES

Paper Matches

- My aunts washed dishes while the uncles
 squirted each other on the lawn with
 garden hoses. Why are we in here,
 I said, and they are out there.
- 5 That's the way it is,
 said Aunt Hetty, the shrivelled-up one.
 I have the rages that small animals have,
 being small, being animal.
- 10 Written on me was a message,
 "At Your Service" like a book of
 paper matches. One by one we were
 taken out and struck.
- We come bearing supper,
 our heads on fire.

1973

AMY LOWELL

*The Lonely Wife*⁷

- The mist is thick. On the wide river, the water-plants float smoothly.
 No letters come; none go.
 There is only the moon, shining through the clouds of a hard, jade-
 green sky,
 Looking down at us so far divided, so anxiously apart.
 All day, going about my affairs, I suffer and grieve, and press the
 5 thought of you closely to my heart.
- My eyebrows are locked in sorrow, I cannot separate them.
 Nightly, nightly, I keep ready half the quilt,
 And wait for the return of that divine dream which is my Lord.
- Beneath the quilt of the Fire-Bird, on the bed of the Silver-Crested Love-
 Pheasant,
 10 Nightly, nightly, I drowse alone.
- The red candles in the silver candlesticks melt, and the wax runs from
 them,
 As the tears of your so Unworthy One escape and continue constantly
 to flow.
- A flower face endures but a short season,
 Yet still he drifts along the river Hsiao and the river Hsiang.

7. A translation/adaptation of a poem by the Chinese poet Li Po (701–762 C.E.).

As I toss on my pillow, I hear the cold, nostalgic sound of the water-
 15 clock:

Shèng! Shèng! it drips, cutting my heart in two.

I rise at dawn. In the Hall of Pictures

They come and tell me that the snow-flowers are falling.

The reed-blind is rolled high, and I gaze at the beautiful, glittering,
 primeval snow,

20 Whitening the distance, confusing the stone steps and the courtyard.

The air is filled with its shining, it blows far out like the smoke of a
 furnace.

The grass-blades are cold and white, like jade girdle pendants.

Surely the Immortals in Heaven must be crazy with wine to cause such
 disorder,

Seizing the white clouds, crumpling them up, destroying them.

1921

LIZ ROSENBERG

The Silence of Women

Old men, as time goes on, grow softer, sweeter,
 while their wives get angrier.

You see them hauling the men across the mall
 or pushing them down on chairs,

5 "Sit there! and don't you move!"

A lifetime of *yes* has left them
 hissing bent as snakes.

It seems even their bones will turn
 against them, once the fruitful years are gone.

10 Something snaps off the houselights,
 and the cells go dim;
 the chicken hatching back into the egg.

Oh lifetime of silence!
 words scattered like a sibyl's leaves.

15 Voice thrown into a baritone storm—
 whose shrilling is a soulful wind
 blown through an instrument
 that cannot beat time

but must make music

20 any way it can.

1994

THOM GUNN

A Blank

The year of griefs being through, they had to merge
 In one last grief, with one last property;
 To view itself like loosened cloud lose edge,
 And pull apart, and leave a voided sky.

- 5 Watching Victorian porches through the glass,
 From the 6 bus, I caught sight of a friend
 Stopped on a corner-kerb to let us pass,
 A four-year-old blond child tugging his hand,
 Which tug he held against with a slight smile.
 10 I knew the smile from certain passages
 Two years ago, thus did not know him well,
 Since they took place in my bedroom and his.

A sturdy-looking admirable young man.
 He said "I chose to do this with my life."

- 15 Casually met he said it of the plan
 He undertook without a friend or wife.

Now visibly tugged upon by his decision,
 Wayward and eager. So this was his son!
 What I admired about his self-permission

- 20 Was that he turned from nothing he had done,
 Or was, or had been, even while he transposed
 The expectations he took out at dark
 —Of Eros playing, features undisclosed—
 Into another pitch, where he might work
 25 With the same melody, and opted so
 To educate, permit, guide, feed, keep warm,
 And love a child to be adopted, though
 The child was still a blank then on a form.

The blank was flesh now, running on its nerve,

- 30 This fair-topped organism dense with charm,
 Its braided muscle grabbing what would serve,
 His countering pull, his own devoted arm.

SUGGESTIONS FOR WRITING

1. Consider “Harlem” by Langston Hughes and “Frederick Douglass” by Robert Hayden. Does Hughes’s poem, written in 1951, predict the violent upheavals of the civil rights movement in the 1960s? Why does Hayden’s poem, written in 1966, promise that Douglass “shall be remembered,” as though Douglass had only recently died? Write an essay in which you explore the way these two poems speak about their own times by pointing to the future.
2. Generations of American schoolchildren were made to memorize and recite Felicia Dorothea Hemans’s “Casabianca,” a fact reflected by the references to “stammering elocution” and “a schoolroom platform” in Elizabeth Bishop’s “Casabianca.” Write an essay in which you discuss Bishop’s poem in light of Hemans’s original. What made Hemans’s poem suitable as a recitation piece? How does Bishop’s poem “answer” Heman’s? How does each poem demonstrate a sense of what poetry is, or what it is for?
3. Research the use of poison gas in World War I and then write an essay in which you analyze Wilfred Owen’s “Dulce et Decorum Est.” How does the poem dramatize the effects of gas? What statement does it make about this new form of warfare?
4. Write an essay in which you first present a detailed narrative of the 1963 Birmingham bombing, based on research. Then analyze Dudley Randall’s “Ballad of Birmingham” in light of this history. To what extent is Randall’s poem based on established facts? To what extent is the poem fictitious? How effective is this mingling of fact and fiction?
5. Write an essay in which you analyze Robert Browning’s “My Last Duchess.” Who is the speaker? Who is being addressed? What is the situation? How do details gradually reveal character and “plot”? What is the advantage to the poet in using this form, the dramatic monologue? How does Browning integrate the poetic elements of language and form into the dramatic monologue?
6. Research the life of the nineteenth-century novelist George Sand, and then write an essay in which you discuss the two sonnets that Elizabeth Barrett Browning dedicated to her. How do these poems, taken together, reveal Barrett Browning’s conception of artistic genius, especially when embodied in a woman?
7. Choose any poem in this book and research the historical or cultural background that informs it. Write an essay in which you discuss how the poem illuminates its context, and vice versa.