

# Understanding the Text

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## 12 TONE

Poetry is full of surprises. Poems express anger or outrage just as effectively as love or sadness, and good poems can be written about going to a rock concert or having lunch or mowing the lawn, as well as about making love or smelling flowers or listening to Beethoven. Even poems on “predictable” subjects can surprise us with unpredicted attitudes, unusual events, or sudden twists. Knowing that a poem is about some particular subject—love, for example, or death—may give us a general idea of what to expect, but it never tells us altogether what we will find in a particular poem. Responding to a poem fully means being open to the poem and its surprises, letting the poem guide us to its own stances, feelings, and ideas—to an illumination of a topic that may be very different from what we expect or what we have thought before. Letting a poem speak to us means listening to *how* the poem says what it says—hearing the tone of voice implied in the way the words are spoken. *What* a poem says involves its **theme**, a statement about its subject. *How* a poem makes that statement involves its **tone**, the poem’s attitude or feelings toward the theme.

The following two poems—one about death and one about love—express attitudes and feelings quite different from those in the poems we have read so far.

MARGE PIERCY



### *Barbie Doll*

This girlchild was born as usual  
and presented dolls that did pee-pee  
and miniature GE stoves and irons  
and wee lipsticks the color of cherry candy.

- 5 Then in the magic of puberty, a classmate said:  
You have a great big nose and fat legs.

She was healthy, tested intelligent,  
possessed strong arms and back,  
abundant sexual drive and manual dexterity.

- 10 She went to and fro apologizing.  
Everyone saw a fat nose on thick legs.

She was advised to play coy,  
exhorted to come on hearty,  
exercise, diet, smile and wheedle.

- 15 Her good nature wore out  
like a fan belt.  
So she cut off her nose and her legs  
and offered them up.

- In the casket displayed on satin she lay  
20 with the undertaker's cosmetics painted on,  
a turned-up putty nose,  
dressed in a pink and white nightie.  
Doesn't she look pretty? everyone said.  
Consummation at last.  
25 To every woman a happy ending.

1973

# W. D. SNODGRASS

## *Leaving the Motel*

Outside, the last kids holler  
Near the pool: they'll stay the night.  
Pick up the towels; fold your collar  
Out of sight.

- 5 Check: is the second bed  
Unrumpled, as agreed?  
Landlords have to think ahead  
In case of need,

- Too. Keep things straight: don't take  
10 The matches, the wrong keyrings—  
We've nowhere we could keep a keepsake—  
Ashtrays, combs, things

That sooner or later others  
Would accidentally find.

- 15 Check: take nothing of one another's  
And leave behind

Your license number only,  
Which they won't care to trace;  
We've paid. Still, should such things get lonely,

- 20 Leave in their vase

An aspirin to preserve  
Our lilacs, the wayside flowers  
We've gathered and must leave to serve  
A few more hours;

- 25 That's all. We can't tell when  
 We'll come back, can't press claims,  
 We would no doubt have other rooms then,  
 Or other names.

1968

The first poem, "Barbie Doll," has the strong note of sadness that characterizes many death poems, but it emphasizes not the girl's death but the disappointments in her life. The only "scene" in the poem (lines 19–23) portrays the unnamed girl at rest in her casket, but the still body in the casket contrasts not with vitality but with frustration and anxiety: her life since puberty (lines 5–6) had been full of apologies and attempts to change her physical appearance and emotional makeup. The "consummation" she achieves in death is not, however, a triumph, despite what people say (line 23). Although the poem's last two words are "happy ending," this girl without a name has died in embarrassment and without fulfillment, and the final lines are ironic, questioning the whole idea of what "happy" means. The cheerful comments at the end lack force and truth because of what we already know; we understand them as ironic because they underline how unhappy the girl was and how false her cosmeticized corpse is to the sad truth of her life.

The poem suggests the falsity and destructiveness of those standards of female beauty that have led to the tragedy of the girl's life. In an important sense, the poem is not really *about* death at all in spite of the fact that the girl's death and her repaired corpse are central to it. As the title suggests, the poem dramatizes how standardized, commercialized notions of femininity and prettiness can be painful and destructive to those whose bodies do not precisely fit the conformist models, and the poem vigorously attacks those conventional standards and the widespread, unthinking acceptance of them.

"Leaving the Motel" similarly goes in quite a different direction from many poems on the subject of love. Instead of expressing assurance about how love lasts and endures, or about the sincerity and depth of affection, this poem describes a parting of lovers after a brief, surreptitious sexual encounter. But it does not emphasize sexuality or eroticism in the meeting of the nameless lovers (we see them only as they prepare to leave), nor does it suggest why or how they have found each other, or what either of them is like as a person. It focuses on how careful they must be not to get caught, how exact and calculating they must be in their planning, how finite and limited their encounter must be, how sealed off this encounter is from the rest of their lives. The poem relates the tiny details the lovers must think of, the agreements they must observe, and the ritual checklist of their duties ("Check . . . Keep things straight . . . Check . . .," lines 5, 9, 15). Affection and sentiment have their small place in the poem (notice the care for the flowers, lines 19–24, and the thought of "press[ing] claims," line 26), but the emphasis is on temporariness, uncertainty, and limits. Although it is about an illicit, perhaps adulterous, sexual encounter, there is no sex in the poem, only a kind of archaeological record of lust.

Labeling a poem a "love poem" or a "death poem" is primarily a matter of convenience; such categories indicate the **subject** of a poem, or the event or **topic** it chooses to engage. But as the poems we have been looking at suggest, poems that may be loosely called "love poems" or "death poems" may differ widely from

one another, express totally different attitudes or ideas, and concentrate on very different aspects of the subject. The main advantages of grouping poems in this way is that a reader can become conscious of individual differences; a reading of two poems side by side may suggest how each is distinctive in what it has to say and how it says it.

The theme of a poem may be expressed in several different ways, and poems often have more than one theme. We could say, for example, that the theme of “Leaving the Motel” is that illicit love is secretive, careful, transitory, and short on emotion and sentiment, or that secret sexual encounters tend to be brief, calculated, and characterized by restrained or hesitant feelings. “Barbie Doll” suggests that commercialized standards destroy humane values; that rigid and idealized notions of normality cripple those who are different; that people are easily and tragically led to accept evaluations thrust upon them by others; that American consumers tend to be conformists, easily influenced in their outlook by advertising and by commercial products; that children who do not conform to middle-class standards and notions don’t have a chance. The poem implies each of these ideas, and all are quite central to it. But none of these assertions individually nor all of them together can fully express or explain the poem itself. To state the themes in such a brief and abstract way—though it may help to clarify what the poem does and does not say—cannot do justice to the experience of the poem, the way it works on us as readers, the way we respond. Poems affect us in all sorts of ways—emotional and psychological as well as rational—and often a poem’s dramatization of a story, an event, or a moment bypasses our rational responses and affects us far more deeply than a clear and logical argument would.

Here is a poem even more directly about desire and its implications. It too is cautious, even critical, but it represents the appeal of both drugs and sex as powerfully as it depicts the fear of their consequences. The “Plague” is here the AIDS epidemic in America, especially among gay men, in the early 1990s.

THOM GUNN

### *In Time of Plague*

My thoughts are crowded with death  
 and it draws so oddly on the sexual  
 that I am confused  
 confused to be attracted  
 5 by, in effect, my own annihilation.  
 Who are these two, these fiercely attractive men  
 who want me to stick their needle in my arm?  
 They tell me they are called Brad and John,  
 one from here, one from Denver, sitting the same  
 10 on the bench as they talk to me,  
 their legs spread apart, their eyes attentive.  
 I love their daring, their looks, their jargon,  
 and what they have in mind.

Their mind is the mind of death.  
 15 They know it, and do not know it,  
 and they are like me in that  
 (I know it, and do not know it)  
 and like the flow of people through this bar.  
 Brad and John thirst heroically together  
 20 for euphoria—for a state of ardent life  
 in which we could all stretch ourselves  
 and lose our differences. I seek  
 to enter their minds: am I a fool,  
 and they direct and right, properly  
 25 testing themselves against risk,  
 as a human must, and does,  
 or are they the fools, their alert faces  
 mere death's heads lighted glamorously?

I weigh possibilities  
 30 till I am afraid of the strength  
 of my own health  
 and of their evident health.

They get restless at last with my indecisiveness  
 and so, first one, and then the other,  
 35 move off into the moving concourse of people  
 who are boisterous and bright  
 carrying in their faces and throughout their bodies  
 the news of life and death.

1992

Delicate subject, sensitive poem. The situation and narrative here are quite clear, and the speaker is plainly attracted by the two men and “what they have in mind” (line 13), but the poem is about a mental state rather than physical action. The tone is carefully poised between excitement and fear—so much so that the two emotions don’t just coexist but are nearly one, and a lust for life and attraction to death are very close. The speaker realizes that he is “attracted by . . . my own annihilation” (lines 4–5), and his vacillation about action involves an internal debate (“I weigh possibilities,” line 29) between desire and self-protection. The tone of voice here is both excited and cautionary—at the same time.

Poems, then, can differ widely from one another even when they share a common subject. And the subjects of poetry can also vary widely. It isn’t true that certain subjects are “poetic” and that others aren’t appropriate to poetry. Any human activity, thought, or feeling can be the subject of poetry. Poetry often deals with beauty and the softer, more attractive human emotions, but it can deal with ugliness and unattractive human conduct as well, for poetry seeks to represent human beings and human events, showing us ourselves not only as we would like to be but as we are. Good poetry gets written about all kinds of topics, in all kinds of forms, with all kinds of attitudes. Here, for example, is a poem about a prison inmate—and about the conflict between individual and societal values.

## ETHERIDGE KNIGHT

*Hard Rock Returns to Prison from the Hospital for  
the Criminal Insane*

Hard Rock was “known not to take no shit  
 From nobody,” and he had the scars to prove it:  
 Split purple lips, lumped ears, welts above  
 His yellow eyes, and one long scar that cut  
 5 Across his temple and plowed through a thick  
 Canopy of kinky hair.

The WORD was that Hard Rock wasn’t a mean nigger  
 Anymore, that the doctors had bored a hole in his head,  
 Cut out part of his brain, and shot electricity  
 10 Through the rest. When they brought Hard Rock back,  
 Handcuffed and chained, he was turned loose,  
 Like a freshly gelded stallion, to try his new status.  
 And we all waited and watched, like indians at a corral,  
 To see if the WORD was true.

15 As we waited we wrapped ourselves in the cloak  
 Of his exploits: “Man, the last time, it took eight  
 Screws to put him in the Hole.”<sup>1</sup> “Yeah, remember when he  
 Smacked the captain with his dinner tray?” “He set  
 The record for time in the Hole—67 straight days!”  
 20 “Ol Hard Rock! man, that’s one crazy nigger.”  
 And then the jewel of a myth that Hard Rock had once bit  
 A screw on the thumb and poisoned him with syphilitic spit.

The testing came, to see if Hard Rock was really tame.  
 A hillbilly called him a black son of a bitch  
 25 And didn’t lose his teeth, a screw who knew Hard Rock  
 From before shook him down and barked in his face.  
 And Hard Rock did *nothing*. Just grinned and looked silly,  
 His eyes empty like knot holes in a fence.

And even after we discovered that it took Hard Rock  
 30 Exactly 3 minutes to tell you his first name,  
 We told ourselves that he had just wised up,  
 Was being cool; but we could not fool ourselves for long,  
 And we turned away, our eyes on the ground. Crushed.  
 He had been our Destroyer, the doer of things  
 35 We dreamed of doing but could not bring ourselves to do,  
 The fears of years, like a biting whip,  
 Had cut grooves too deeply across our backs.

1968

1. Solitary confinement. *Screws*: guards.

The picture of Hard Rock as a kind of hero to other prison inmates is established early in the poem through a retelling of the legends circulated about him; the straightforward chronology of the poem sets up the mystery of how he will react after his “treatment” in the hospital. The poem identifies with those who wait; they are hopeful that Hard Rock’s spirit has not been broken by surgery or shock treatments, and the lines crawl almost to a stop with disappointment in stanza 4. The “*nothing*” (line 27) of Hard Rock’s response to taunting and the emptiness of his eyes (“like knot holes in a fence,” line 28) reduce the narrator’s hopes to despair. The final stanza recounts the observers’ attempts to reinterpret, to hang onto hope that their symbol of heroism can stand up against the best efforts to tame him, but the spirit has gone out of the hero-worshippers, too, and the poem records them as beaten, tamed, deprived of their spirit as Hard Rock has been of his. The poem records the despair of the hopeless, and it protests against the cruel exercise of power that can quash even as defiant a figure as Hard Rock.

The following poem is equally full of anger and disappointment, but it expresses its attitudes in a very different way.

# WILLIAM BLAKE



## *London*

I wander through each chartered street,  
Near where the chartered Thames does flow,  
And mark in every face I meet  
Marks of weakness, marks of woe.

- 5 In every cry of every man,  
In every Infant’s cry of fear,  
In every voice, in every ban,  
The mind-forged manacles I hear.

- How the Chimney-sweeper’s cry  
10 Every black’ning Church appalls;  
And the hapless Soldier’s sigh  
Runs in blood down Palace walls.

- But most through midnight streets I hear  
How the youthful Harlot’s curse  
15 Blasts the new-born Infant’s tear,  
And blights with plagues the Marriage hearse.

1794

The poem gives a strong sense of how London feels to this particular observer; it is cluttered, constricting, oppressive. The wordplay here articulates and connects the strong emotions he associates with London experiences. The repeated words—“every,” for example, and “cry”—intensify the sense of total despair in the city and create connections between things not necessarily related, such as the cries of street

vendors with the cries for help. The twice-used word “chartered” implies strong feelings, too. The streets, instead of seeming alive with people or bustling with movement, are rigidly, coldly determined, controlled, cramped. Likewise the river seems as if it were planned, programmed, laid out by an oppressor. In actual fact, the course of the Thames through the city had been altered (slightly) by the government before Blake’s time, but most important is the word’s emotional force, the sense it projects of constriction and artificiality: the speaker experiences London as if human artifice had totally usurped nature. Moreover, according to the poem, people are victimized, “marked” by their confrontations with the city and its faceless institutions: the “Soldier’s sigh” that “runs in blood down Palace walls” vividly suggests, through metaphor, both the powerlessness of the individual and the callousness of power. The description of the city has clearly become, by now, a subjective, highly emotional, and vivid expression of how the speaker feels about London and what it represents to him.

*Poetry makes nothing happen.*

—W. H. AUDEN

Another thing about “London”: at first it looks like an account of a personal experience, as if the speaker is describing and interpreting as he goes along: “I wander through each chartered street.” But soon it is clear that he is describing many wanderings, putting together impressions from many walks, re-creating a typical walk—which shows him “every” person in the streets, allows him to generalize about the churches being “appalled” (literally, made white) by the cry of the representative Chimney-sweeper, and leads to his conclusions about soldiers, prostitutes, and infants. We receive not a personal record of an event, but a representation of it in retrospect—not a story, not a narrative or chronological account of events, but a dramatization of self that compresses many experiences and impressions into one.

*When power leads man toward arrogance, poetry reminds him of his limitations. When power narrows the areas of man’s concern, poetry reminds him of the richness and diversity of his existence.*

*When power corrupts, poetry cleanses.*

—JOHN F. KENNEDY

“London” is somber in spite of the poet’s playfulness with words. Wordplay may be witty and funny if it calls attention to its own cleverness, but here it prompts the discovery of unsuspected (but meaningful) connections between things. The tone of the poem is sad, despairing, and angry; reading it aloud, one would try to show in the tone of one’s voice the strong feelings that the poem expresses, just as one would try to reproduce tenderness and caring and passion in reading aloud “The Tally Stick” or “How Do I Love Thee?”

The following two poems are “about” animals, although both of them place their final emphasis on human beings: the animal in each case is only the means to the end of exploring human nature. The poems share a common assumption that animal behavior may appear to reflect human habits and conduct and may reveal much about ourselves, and in each case the character central to the poem is revealed to be surprisingly unlike the way she thinks of herself. But the poems are very different. Read each poem aloud, and try to imagine what each main character is like. What tones of voice do you use to help express the character of the “killer” (line 24) in the first poem? What demands on your voice does the second poem make?



## MAXINE KUMIN

*Woodchucks*

- Gassing the woodchucks didn't turn out right.  
 The knockout bomb from the Feed and Grain Exchange  
 was featured as merciful, quick at the bone  
 and the case we had against them was airtight,  
 5 both exits shoehorned shut with puddingstone,<sup>2</sup>  
 but they had a sub-sub-basement out of range.
- Next morning they turned up again, no worse  
 for the cyanide than we for our cigarettes  
 and state-store Scotch, all of us up to scratch.  
 10 They brought down the marigolds as a matter of course  
 and then took over the vegetable patch  
 nipping the broccoli shoots, beheading the carrots.
- The food from our mouths, I said, righteously thrilling  
 to the feel of the .22, the bullets' neat noses.  
 15 I, a lapsed pacifist fallen from grace  
 puffed with Darwinian pieties for killing,  
 now drew a bead on the littlest woodchuck's face.  
 He died down in the everbearing roses.
- Ten minutes later I dropped the mother. She  
 20 flipfopped in the air and fell, her needle teeth  
 still hooked in a leaf of early Swiss chard.  
 Another baby next. O one-two-three  
 the murderer inside me rose up hard,  
 the hawkeye killer came on stage forthwith.
- 25 There's one chuck left. Old wily fellow, he keeps  
 me cocked and ready day after day after day.  
 All night I hunt his humped-up form. I dream  
 I sight along the barrel in my sleep.  
 If only they'd all consented to die unseen  
 30 gassed underground the quiet Nazi way.

1972

2. A mixture of cement, pebbles, and gravel.

ADRIENNE RICH

*Aunt Jennifer's Tigers*

Aunt Jennifer's tigers prance across a screen,  
 Bright topaz denizens of a world of green.  
 They do not fear the men beneath the tree;  
 They pace in sleek chivalric certainty.

- 5 Aunt Jennifer's fingers fluttering through her wool  
 Find even the ivory needle hard to pull.  
 The massive weight of Uncle's wedding band  
 Sits heavily upon Aunt Jennifer's hand.

- When Aunt is dead, her terrified hands will lie  
 10 Still ringed with ordeals she was mastered by.  
 The tigers in the panel that she made  
 Will go on prancing, proud and unafraid.

1951

If you read “Woodchucks” aloud, how would your tone of voice change from beginning to end? What tone would you use to read the ending? How does the hunter feel about her increasing attraction to violence? Why does the poem begin by calling the gassing of the woodchucks “merciful” and end by describing it as “the quiet Nazi way”? What names does the hunter call herself? How does the name-calling affect your feelings about her? Exactly when does the hunter begin to *enjoy* the feel of the gun and the idea of killing? How does the poet make that clear?

In the second poem, why are tigers a particularly appropriate contrast to the quiet and subdued manner of Aunt Jennifer? What words describing the tigers seem particularly significant? How is the tiger an opposite of Aunt Jennifer? In what ways does it externalize her secrets? Why are Aunt Jennifer's hands described as “terrified”? What clues does the poem give about why Aunt Jennifer is so afraid? How does the poem make you feel about Aunt Jennifer? about her tigers? about her life? How would you describe the tone of the poem? How does the poet feel about Aunt Jennifer?

Twenty years after writing “Aunt Jennifer's Tigers,” Adrienne Rich said this about the poem:

In writing this poem, composed and apparently cool as it is, I thought I was creating a portrait of an imaginary woman. But this woman suffers from the opposition of her imagination, worked out in tapestry, and her lifestyle, “ringed with ordeals she was mastered by.” It was important to me that Aunt Jennifer was a person as distinct from myself as possible—distanced by the formalism of the poem, by its objective, observant tone—even by putting the woman in a different generation. In those years formalism was part of the strategy—like asbestos gloves, it allowed me to handle materials I couldn't pick up bare-handed.<sup>3</sup>

3. From “When We Dead Awaken: Writing As Re-Vision,” a talk given in December 1971 at the Women's Forum of the Modern Language Association.

Not often do we have such an explicit comment on a poem by its author, and (although such a statement may clarify why the author chose a particular mode of presentation and how the poem fits into the author's own patterns of thinking and growing) we don't actually need the explanation in order to understand and experience the force of the poem. Most poems contain within them all we need to tap the human and artistic resources they offer us.

Subject, theme, and tone: each of these categories gives us a way to begin considering poems and how one poem differs from another. Comparing poems with the same subject or a similar theme or tone can lead to a clearer understanding of each individual poem and can refine our responses to their subtle differences. The title of a poem ("Leaving the Motel," for example) or the way a poem first introduces its subject can often give us a sense of what to expect, but we must be open to surprise, too. No two poems affect us in exactly the same way; the variety of possible poems multiplies when you think of all the possible themes and tones that can be explored within any single subject. Varieties of feeling often coincide with varieties of thinking, and readers open to the pleasures of the unexpected may find themselves learning, growing, becoming more sensitive to ideas and human issues—as well as more articulate about feelings and thoughts they already have.

## MANY TONES: POEMS ABOUT FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS

GALWAY KINNELL

### *After Making Love We Hear Footsteps*

For I can snore like a bullhorn  
 or play loud music  
 or sit up talking with any reasonably sober Irishman  
 and Fergus will only sink deeper  
 5 into his dreamless sleep, which goes by all in one flash,  
 but let there be that heavy breathing  
 or a stifled come-cry anywhere in the house  
 and he will wrench himself awake  
 and make for it on the run—as now, we lie together,  
 10 after making love, quiet, touching along the length of our bodies,  
 familiar touch of the long-married,  
 and he appears—in his baseball pajamas, it happens,  
 the neck opening so small  
 he has to screw them on, which one day may make him wonder  
 15 about the mental capacity of baseball players—  
 and says, "Are you loving and snuggling? May I join?"  
 He flops down between us and hugs us and snuggles himself to sleep,  
 his face gleaming with satisfaction at being this very child.

In the half darkness we look at each other  
 20 and smile  
 and touch arms across his little, startlingly muscled body—

this one whom habit of memory propels to the ground of his making,  
 sleeper only the mortal sounds can sing awake,  
 this blessing love gives again into our arms.

1980

- How does the language in lines 1–5 establish the poem’s tone? Do the last lines (starting with line 22) alter the tone in any way?

### EMILY GROSHOLZ

#### *Eden*

In lurid cartoon colors, the big baby  
 dinosaur steps backwards under the shadow  
 of an approaching tyrannosaurus rex.  
 “His mommy going to fix it,” you remark,  
 5 serenely anxious, hoping for the best.

After the big explosion, after the lights  
 go down inside the house and up the street,  
 we rush outdoors to find a squirrel stopped  
 in straws of half-gnawed cable. I explain,  
 10 trying to fit the facts, “The squirrel is dead.”

No, you explain it otherwise to me.  
 “He’s sleeping. And his mommy going to come.”  
 Later, when the squirrel has been removed,  
 “His mommy fix him,” you insist, insisting  
 15 on the right to know what you believe.

The world is truly full of fabulous  
 great and curious small inhabitants,  
 and you’re the freshly minted, unashamed  
 Adam in this garden. You preside,  
 20 appreciate, and judge our proper names.

Like God, I brought you here.  
 Like God, I seem to be omnipotent,  
 mostly helpful, sometimes angry as hell.  
 I fix whatever minor faults arise  
 25 with bandaids, batteries, masking tape, and pills.

But I am powerless, as you must know,  
 to chase the serpent sliding in the grass,  
 or the tall angel with the flaming sword  
 who scares you when he rises suddenly  
 30 behind the gates of sunset.

1992

- How does Grosholz use language to elevate the poem’s subject matter from the trivial and childish to the biblical and profound?

## LI-YOUNG LEE

*Persimmons*

- In sixth grade Mrs. Walker  
 slapped the back of my head  
 and made me stand in the corner  
 for not knowing the difference  
 5 between *persimmon* and *precision*.  
 How to choose  
 persimmons. This is precision.  
 Ripe ones are soft and brown-spotted.  
 Sniff the bottoms. The sweet one  
 10 will be fragrant. How to eat:  
 put the knife away, lay down newspaper.  
 Peel the skin tenderly, not to tear the meat.  
 Chew the skin, suck it,  
 and swallow. Now, eat  
 15 the meat of the fruit,  
 so sweet,  
 all of it, to the heart.
- Donna undresses, her stomach is white.  
 In the yard, dewy and shivering  
 20 with crickets, we lie naked,  
 face-up, face-down.  
 I teach her Chinese.  
 Crickets: *chuu chiu*. Dew: I've forgotten.  
 Naked: I've forgotten.  
 25 *Ni, wo:* you and me.  
 I part her legs,  
 remember to tell her  
 she is beautiful as the moon.
- Other words  
 30 that got me into trouble were  
*fight* and *fright*, *wren* and *yarn*.  
 Fight was what I did when I was frightened,  
 fright was what I felt when I was fighting.  
 Wrens are small, plain birds,  
 35 yarn is what one knits with.  
 Wrens are soft as yarn.  
 My mother made birds out of yarn.  
 I loved to watch her tie the stuff;  
 a bird, a rabbit, a wee man.
- 40 Mrs. Walker brought a persimmon to class  
 and cut it up  
 so everyone could taste

a *Chinese apple*. Knowing  
 it wasn't ripe or sweet, I didn't eat  
 45 but watched the other faces.

My mother said every persimmon has a sun  
 inside, something golden, glowing,  
 warm as my face.

Once, in the cellar, I found two wrapped in newspaper,  
 50 forgotten and not yet ripe.  
 I took them and set both on my bedroom windowsill,  
 where each morning a cardinal  
 sang, *The sun, the sun*.  
 Finally understanding  
 55 he was going blind,  
 my father sat up all one night  
 waiting for a song, a ghost.  
 I gave him the persimmons,  
 swelled, heavy as sadness,  
 60 and sweet as love.

This year, in the muddy lighting  
 of my parents' cellar, I rummage, looking  
 for something I lost.  
 My father sits on the tired, wooden stairs,  
 65 black cane between his knees,  
 hand over hand, gripping the handle.

He's so happy that I've come home.  
 I ask how his eyes are, a stupid question.  
*All gone*, he answers.

70 Under some blankets, I find a box.  
 Inside the box I find three scrolls.  
 I sit beside him and untie  
 three paintings by my father:  
 Hibiscus leaf and a white flower.  
 75 Two cats preening.  
 Two persimmons, so full they want to drop from the cloth.

He raises both hands to touch the cloth,  
 asks, *Which is this?*

*This is persimmons, Father.*

80 *Oh, the feel of the wolftail on the silk,*  
*the strength, the tense*  
*precision in the wrist.*  
*I painted them hundreds of times*  
*eyes closed. These I painted blind.*  
 85 *Some things never leave a person:*  
*scent of the hair of one you love,*

*the texture of persimmons,  
in your palm, the ripe weight.*

1986

- How does the tone shift as the focal point of the poem changes? What key words and phrases mark the tone in each stanza?

ROBERT HAYDEN

*Those Winter Sundays*

Sundays too my father got up early  
and put his clothes on in the blueblack cold,  
then with cracked hands that ached  
from labor in the weekday weather made  
5 banked fires blaze. No one ever thanked him.  
  
I'd wake and hear the cold splintering, breaking.  
When the rooms were warm, he'd call,  
and slowly I would rise and dress,  
fearing the chronic angers of that house,  
  
10 Speaking indifferently to him,  
who had driven out the cold  
and polished my good shoes as well.  
What did I know, what did I know  
of love's austere and lonely offices?

1966

- Why does the poem begin with the words "Sundays too" (rather than, say, "On Sundays")? What are the "austere and lonely offices" of love in the poem's final line?

DANIEL TOBIN

*The Clock*

Bored with plastic armies,  
he climbs onto the parlor loveseat  
and watches the wide expression of the clock.  
He doesn't know what time is,  
5 doesn't know how in no time  
those numbers will fill his days  
the way water fills a bath  
into which an exhausted man  
lowers himself, not wanting to rise.

- 10 Sun and moon gaze back at him  
 from the glaze of the silver frame,  
 each with a human face,  
 his own face mirrored there.  
 Look closer, his mother says,  
 15 and you can see the small hand move.  
 And he leans closer now, steadied  
 in her arms, the hand a winded runner  
 lapped on the track. That's hours,  
 she says, the big hand's minutes, the quick,  
 20 seconds. And the boy fingers the pivot  
 anchoring them, his touch  
 stirs with the machine.  
*I'm older now, and now, and now.* The gears  
 start to tick through every room of that house.
- 1999

- How do the language and tone shift when the boy touches the clock? What exactly has changed?

### AGHA SHAHID ALI

#### *Postcard from Kashmir*

(for Pavan Sabgal)

- Kashmir shrinks into my mailbox,  
 my home a neat four by six inches.
- I always loved neatness. Now I hold  
 the half-inch Himalayas in my hand.
- 5 This is home. And this the closest  
 I'll ever be to home. When I return,  
 the colors won't be so brilliant,  
 the Jhelum's waters<sup>1</sup> so clean,  
 so ultramarine. My love  
 10 so overexposed.
- And my memory will be a little  
 out of focus, in it  
 a giant negative, black  
 and white, still undeveloped.

1987

- What words characterize the speaker's dreams of home in this poem? What words reveal a more realistic attitude?

1. The river Jhelum runs through Kashmir and Pakistan.



PAT MORA

*Elena*

My Spanish isn't enough.  
 I remember how I'd smile  
 listening to my little ones,  
 understanding every word they'd say,  
 5 their jokes, their songs, their plots.  
*Vamos a pedirle dulces a mamá. Vamos.*<sup>2</sup>  
 But that was in Mexico.  
 Now my children go to American high schools.  
 They speak English. At night they sit around  
 10 the kitchen table, laugh with one another.  
 I stand by the stove and feel dumb, alone.  
 I bought a book to learn English.  
 My husband frowned, drank more beer.  
 My oldest said, "*Mamá*, he doesn't want you  
 15 to be smarter than he is." I'm forty,  
 embarrassed at mispronouncing words,  
 embarrassed at the laughter of my children,  
 the grocer, the mailman. Sometimes I take  
 my English book and lock myself in the bathroom,  
 20 say the thick words softly,  
 for if I stop trying, I will be deaf  
 when my children need my help.

1985

- What does the speaker mean by the first line—"My Spanish isn't enough"? What other words in the poem address the inadequacy of language?

KELLY CHERRY

*Alzheimer's*

He stands at the door, a crazy old man  
 Back from the hospital, his mind rattling  
 Like the suitcase, swinging from his hand,  
 That contains shaving cream, a piggy bank,  
 5 A book he sometimes pretends to read,  
 His clothes. On the brick wall beside him  
 Roses and columbine slug it out for space, claw the mortar.  
 The sun is shining, as it does late in the afternoon

2. Let's go ask mama for sweets. Let's go.

- In England, after rain.
- 10 Sun hardens the house, reifies it,  
Strikes the iron grillwork like a smithy  
And sparks fly off, burning in the bushes—  
The rosebushes—  
While the white wood trim defines solidity in space.
- 15 This is his house. He remembers it as his,  
Remembers the walkway he built between the front room  
And the garage, the rhododendron he planted in back,  
The car he used to drive. He remembers himself,  
A younger man, in a tweed hat, a man who loved
- 20 Music. There is no time for that now. No time for music,  
The peculiar screeching of strings, the luxurious  
Fiddling with emotion.  
Other things have become more urgent.  
Other matters are now of greater import, have more
- 25 Consequence, must be attended to. The first  
Thing he must do, now that he is home, is decide who  
This woman is, this old, white-haired woman  
Standing here in the doorway,  
Welcoming him in.

1997

- How do phrases like “a crazy old man” and “a book he sometimes pretends to read” indicate the speaker’s feelings toward her father? Does her attitude shift at some point? Where?

## ANDREW HUDGINS

### *Begotten*

- I’ve never, as some children do,  
looked at my folks and thought, I *must*  
have come from someone else—  
rich parents who’d misplaced me, but
- 5 who would, as in a myth or novel,  
return and claim me. Hell, no. I saw  
my face in cousins’ faces, heard  
my voice in their high drawls. And Sundays,  
after the dinner plates were cleared,
- 10 I lingered, elbow propped on red  
oilcloth, and studied great-uncles, aunts,  
and cousins new to me. They squirmed.  
I stared till I discerned the features  
they’d gotten from the family larder:
- 15 eyes, nose, lips, hair? I stared until,  
uncomfortable, they’d snap, “Hey, boy—  
what are you looking at? At me?”

“No, sir,” I’d lie. “No, ma’am.” I’d count ten  
 and then continue staring at them.  
 20 I never had to ask, What am I?  
 I stared at my blood-kin, and thought,  
 So *this*, dear God, is what I am.

1994

- What can you infer from the language in “Begotten” about the speaker’s attitude toward his life?

SIMON J. ORTIZ

*My Father's Song*

Wanting to say things,  
 I miss my father tonight.  
 His voice, the slight catch,  
 the depth from his thin chest,  
 5 the tremble of emotion  
 in something he has just said  
 to his son, his song:

We planted corn one Spring at Açu—  
 we planted several times  
 10 but this one particular time  
 I remember the soft damp sand  
 in my hand.

My father had stopped at one point  
 to show me an overturned furrow;  
 15 the plowshare had unearthed  
 the burrow nest of a mouse  
 in the soft moist sand.

Very gently, he scooped tiny pink animals  
 into the palm of his hand  
 20 and told me to touch them.  
 We took them to the edge  
 of the field and put them in the shade  
 of a sand moist clod.

I remember the very softness  
 25 of cool and warm sand and tiny alive mice  
 and my father saying things.

1976

- What are the “things” that the speaker wants to say? Are they the same things he remembers his father saying? Does the poem itself say these things?

## SUGGESTIONS FOR WRITING

1. Both “Eden,” by Emily Grosholz, and “The Clock,” by Daniel Tobin, use shifts of tone to elevate the poems’ subject matter from the narrow concerns of children to the more universal issues that face adults. Where, in each poem, is this shift of tone? How is the shift revealed through language? Write an essay in which you compare and contrast the way each poet accomplishes this broadening of perspective.
2. In what way is precision of language the real subject of Li-Young Lee’s “Persimmons”? How does the poem itself embody this subject? Write an essay in which you explore the subtle shifts in tone throughout the poem, and the way these shifts affect a reader’s feelings. What, finally, seems to be the poet’s attitude toward language as a medium for the precise expression of feeling?
3. What words in Robert Hayden’s “Those Winter Sundays” suggest the son’s feelings toward his father and his home? What words indicate that the poet’s attitudes have changed since the time depicted in the poem? Write an essay in which you compare the speaker’s feelings, as a youth and then later as a man, about his father and his home.
4. Kelly Cherry’s “Alzheimer’s” uses contrasts—especially before and after—to characterize the ravages of Alzheimer’s disease. What evidence does the poem provide about what the man used to be like? What specific changes have come about? How does the setting of the poem suggest some of those changes? In what ways do the stabilities of house, landscape, and other people clarify what has happened? Write an essay about the function of the poem’s setting.
5. Write an essay in which you consider the use of language to create tone in any grouping of two or more poems in this chapter.