The Compleat Poetry Workshop
Learning to Read Poems
(Classic to Contemporary)

“The Poetry Reading” from a poem by Anna Swir
Collaborative painting by W. Shumway, M. Allison, and Sidney Rowe

Sheridan Blau
University of California, Santa Barbara

Bonnie Ericson
California State University, Northridge

Kathleen Dudden Rowlands
California State University, Northridge
Multicultural Voices: Literature from the United States.
Glenview, IL: ScottForesman, 1995. ("Without Title,” “Speaking With Hands”).

"They don’t give us time to learn anything in school; we have to listen to the teacher all day.”
Selecting Poems

Keep the following criteria in mind as you choose poems for your classroom. They should:

**BE ACCESSIBLE TO STUDENTS.**
This means that both language and content should be within the students' range of experience.

**BE ENJOYABLE FOR STUDENTS.**
Consider poems that are humorous, topical, or speak to issues specifically germane to your students' age groups.

**HAVE INTERESTING LANGUAGE.**
Because poems are brief, they provide wonderful opportunities for targeted, close-up looks at how language can be used in interesting ways. Use poetry to encourage students to consider the language as both playful and powerful!

**PRESENT A SURPRISE.**
Poems often present a surprise—in content, in language, or in outcome. Surprises provide you and your students intellectual engagement and enjoyment.

**OFFER SOMETHING TO TALK ABOUT.**
What are the issues raised by the poem? What does its language reveal about its speaker? How does the poet use sound? Metaphor? What emotional and/or intellectual experience(s) does the poem provide?

**OFFER SOMETHING TO TEACH.**
Use each poem to teach something about reading poems, about language, and/or the human experience.

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References


Teaching Poems

STRATEGY #1 MULTIPLE READINGS

1. Select a poem, using the criteria above or others of your own, whose meanings and language will unfold with multiple readings.

2. Provide student pairs with pens having three different colors of ink and a copy of the poem.*

3. Provide directions to students for their first reading:
   a. Read the poem silently and individually, and as you read write responses about what you notice or questions you have in one color of ink.
   b. When you’ve finished this first reading, turn the poem over and write a statement saying what you think the poem is about.
   c. Share your notes, questions, and statement with your partner.

4. Provide directions to students for their second reading: Repeat step 3, using a different color ink for writing.

5. Provide final directions to students: Repeat step 3, using the final color ink for writing. In addition to writing a statement describing what you think the poem is about, make a comment on how your understanding of the poem changed with the three readings.

6. Have a volunteer read the poem aloud to the whole class and discuss readings; lead a whole class discussion about the poem and how multiple readings influenced the students’ understanding of it.

*Post-it notes of different colors or a piece of notebook paper divided vertically into thirds and aligned with the lines of the poem may be used for a poem in a text.

Momma

Momma

pale as the Southern secrets
in her blood
was princess of morning.

She rose alone
to apocalyptic silence,
set the sun in our windows
and daily mended the world

through years of never-enough,
hiding her dreams
in a typewriter
rusting beneath the sink.

In weary dresses
that would not survive the Fifties
she gifted us with memory
and created home.

Paulette Childress White

Between Walls

the black wings
of the
hospital where
nothing

will grow lie
cinders

in which shine
the broken
pieces of a green bottle.

William Carlos Williams
In Praise of Zigzags
For a Girl Failing Geometry

Maybe she does her homework the way she does her chores.
She moves quickly when she vacuums, forgetting corners in the living room, repeating others,
zigsags recklessly across the carpet, raising those pale tracks
behind her in the wool, crossing and recrossing them. And not once
does geometry cross her mind.
Outside she wanders aimlessly behind the lawnmower,
rolls toward the middle of the lawn then doubles back.
For a while, she'll follow straight lines--the fence, the hedge, the walk--
then go off on a tangent, spiraling around the birch or the maple.
When she finishes, she leaves the lawnmower out, leaves
a trail of unmown strips and crisscrosses,
her scribbling on the lawn like a line of thought that's hard to follow.
As far as she's concerned the shortest distance between two points
is confining.

Jane O. Wayne

Lineage

My grandmothers were strong.
They followed plows and bent to toil
They moved through fields sowing seed.
They touched earth and grain grew.
They were full of sturdiness and singing.
My grandmothers were strong.

My grandmothers are full of memories.
Smelling of soap and onions and wet clay
With veins rolling roughly over quick hands
They have many clean words to say.
My grandmothers were strong.
Why am I not as they?

Margaret Walker

STRATEGY #2 MULTIPLE TEXTS

Topic
These poems are thematically/topically related and the ideas about the topic or theme in each can be compared and contrasted:

“The Gift” (Lee)                            “To be of use” (Piercy)
“My Father’s Hands” (Naranjo-Morese)        “The Monster” (Rodriguez)
Speaking with Hands” (Rodriguez)             “Myrtle” (Kooser)
“Momma” (White)                              “Without Title” (Glancy)
“Lineage” (Walker)                           “The Sacred” (Dunn)
“Family” (Paley)                             “Blink Your Eyes” (Sundiata)
“Notes for a Poem on Being Asian American” (Okita)
“Barbie Says Math Is Hard” (Mori)
“In Praise of Zigzags” (Wayne)
“Tree” (Hudgins)

Poet
Two poems by each of the following are included in the handout. Students could be asked what conclusions they might draw about a poet based on reading two or three of her/his poems (topics, attitudes, forms, tone, background, etc.):

Sara Holbrook          Li Young Lee
Andrew Hudgins          Pat Mora
Ron Koertge             Mary Oliver
Juliet S. Kono          Marge Piercy
Ted Kooser              Luis J. Rodriguez

Form
Consider pairing or grouping poems by these forms: haiku, sonnet, elegy, free verse, narrative. Students can be asked to draw conclusions about the form based on their readings.
Sources for additional poems include these web sources:
http://www.favoritepoem.org/
http://www.loc.gov/poetry/180
http://www.pbs.org/wnet/foolingwithwords
http://www.poems.com/
STRATEGY #3 MULTIPLE READERS

1. Pass out and discuss the poem reading roles (below) with the class. Model the roles* using a sample poem.

2. Select a poem and distribute copies to individuals formed into groups of four students. Assign or have students select roles for reading the poem in each group. Roles 1-3 should be assigned.

3. Each student individually and silently reads the poem and prepares for his or her role. Students in each group participate and discuss the poem according to their roles. After the group discussions, the students share group outcomes according to roles in a whole class discussion.

Poetry Reading Roles

A. THE ACTOR: You will be providing a reading of the poem’s title, the poet, and the poem, both at the beginning and end of your group’s discussion. To prepare, read the poem silently and decide where to pause (end of line, at punctuation, between stanzas, etc.), what kind of tone of voice you will use at different places in the poem, where you may want to read softer or more loudly, the pace or speed of your reading at different places in the poem, and way to emphasize lines you think are key to an understanding of the poem.

B. THE DIRECTOR: You will be leading a discussion of the poem with your group. To prepare, read the poem silently two or more times. Write approximately five-six questions on a piece of paper for the group to discuss that you believe will lead to a good understanding and appreciation of the poem. After the discussion, ask the group which two questions were most successful and make a note in the margin of the paper. If other questions came up in the discussion, add these. You will submit the questions to the teacher.

Blink Your Eyes

(Remembering Sterling A. Brown)

I was on my way to see my woman but the Law said I was on my way thru a red light red light red light and if you saw my woman you could understand, I was just being a man.

It wasn’t about no light it was about my ride and if you saw my ride you could dig that too, you dig? Sunroof stereo radio black leather bucket seats sit low you know, the body’s cool, but the tires are worn.

Ride when the hard time come, ride when they’re gone, in other words the light was green.

I could wake up in the morning without a warning and my world could change: blink you eyes. All depends, all depends on the skin, all depends on the skin you’re living in.

New York City, they got laws can’t no bruthas drive outdoors, in certain neighborhoods, on particular streets near and around certain types of people.

They got laws. All depends, all depends on the skin all depends on the skin you’re living in.

Sekou Sundiata

License and registration.

Deep was the night and the light from the North Star on the car door, déjà vu we’ve been through this before, why did you stop me? Somebody had to stop you.

I watch the news, you always lose. You’re unreliable, that’s undeniable. This is serious, you could be dangerous.
**Sonnet X (From Sidney's *Astrophel & Stella*)**

Reason, in faith thou art well serv'd, that still
Wouldst brabbling be with sense and love in me:
I rather wish'd thee climb the Muses' hill,
Or reach the fruit of Nature's choicest tree,
Or seek heav'n's course, or heav'n's inside to see:
Why shouldst thou toil our thorny soil to till?
Leave sense, and those which sense's objects be:
Deal thou with powers of thoughts, leave love to will.

But thou wouldst needs fight both with love and sense,
With sword of wit, giving wounds of dispraise,
Till downright blows did foil thy cunning fence:

For soon as they strake thee with Stella's rays,
Reason thou kneel'dst, and offeredst straight to prove
reason good, good reason her to love.

Sir Philip Sidney

C. THE CONSULTANT: You will be an expert in an aspect of poetry the class has been learning recently, as directed by your teacher (e.g. simile and metaphor, alliteration, imagery, form). To prepare, read the poem silently two or more times. Identify the similes and metaphors (or other aspect) in the poem and make a chart of the two things compared, their similarities, and your opinion about the effectiveness of each metaphor and simile. You will share your chart with the group and ask them about their views on these metaphors and similes, and the impact these have on the poem. Add their comments to your chart. You’ll submit the chart to the teacher.

D. THE GRAPHIC ARTIST: You will create a visual response to the poem, creating a drawing, collage, storyboard, or other image. Explain your artistic response to the group, the decisions involved, and the connections between it and the poem. Ask for feedback on your creation. You’ll submit your artistic response to the teacher.

E. THE CONNECTOR: You will identify and share connections between the poem and other poems, other literature, and common life experiences of teens. Make a list or chart of these to share with the group, and have the group add other connections. You will submit your list/chart to the teacher.

*With thanks to Harvey Daniels.*
Strategy #4 SROS An Interpretive Reading Strategy

The following heuristic (problem solving technique) is an interpretive reading strategy that is quick, flexible, and easy-to-follow. Readers can use it with many different genres: fiction, non-fiction essays, drama, poems. It is very useful with poetry because often it prevents students from becoming distracted early by a particular word or line and misreading the entire text based on that one fragment.

S means Structure. Without reading the text, look at its shape. What observations can you make about its physical structure? What divisions do you note (chapters, sections, acts, stanzas)? How big are they? Are they the same size? (If not, what predictions might we make about the larger sections?) Do you notice any patterns in these divisions? Look at punctuation. Circle periods and semicolons which signal the ends of clauses. Commas? Other punctuation marks? Check carefully for quotation marks, dashes, and question marks. Identify any time and/or space progressions. Season words? Verb tense? Tense shifts?

R means Rhetorical Situation. Who is speaking, to whom, and about what? What are the circumstances? (The narrator can always be specified, although sometimes in general terms (a father, a woman). Sometimes the audience is specific (his son, her children), but other times it must be defined as a general audience. What is the poem about in general terms (“This is a poem about a man with a horse who stops to look at the woods on a snowy night.”) You may need to do several readings to identify the rhetorical situation with confidence.

The Monster

It erupted into our lives:
Two guys in jeans shoved it through the door
heaving & grunting & biting lower lips.

A large industrial sewing machine.
We called it “the monster.”

It came on a winter’s day,
rented out of mother’s pay.
Once in the living room
the walls seemed to cave in around it.

Black footsteps to our door
brought heaps of cloth for Mama to sew.
Noises of war burst out of the living room.
Rafters rattled. Floors farted
the radio going into static
each time the needle ripped into fabric.

Many nights I’d get up from bed,
wander squinty-eyed down a hallway
and peer through a dust-covered blanket
to where Mama and the monster
did nightly battle.

I could see Mama through the yellow haze
of a single light bulb.
She slouched over the machine.
Her eyes almost closed.
Her hair in disheveled braids;
each stitch binding her life
To scraps of cloth.

Luis J. Rodriguez
There were no markets in Watts. There were these small corner stores we called *marketas* who charged more money for cheaper goods than what existed in other parts of town. The owners were often thieves in white coats who talked to you like animals, who knew you had no options; who knew Watts was the preferred landfill of the city.

One time, Mama started an argument at the cash register. In her broken English, speaking with her hands, she had us children stand around her as she fought with the grocer on prices & quality & dignity.

Mama became a woman swept by a sobering madness; she must have been what Moses saw in the burning bush, a pillar of fire, consuming the still air that reeked of overripe fruit and bad meat from the frozen food section.

She refused to leave until the owner called the police. The police came and argued too, but Mama wouldn’t stop. They pulled her into the parking lot, called her crazy . . . and then Mama showed them crazy!

They didn’t know what to do but let her go, and Mama took us children back toward home, tired of being tired.

Luis J. Rodriguez
STRATEGY # 6 MULTIPLE VOICES

Model oral interpretation of a poem read in class, perhaps using a videotaped or audiotaped reading. Or, model using class members and a readers theatre-type approach (highlighted sections for different voices). Briefly discuss choral reading (single voice, duet, multiple voices, same/mixed gender voices), volume, pace, tone of voice, and other aspects of reading poetry aloud.

These poems, in addition to others, lend themselves to performance readings:
- “Family” by Grace Paley
- “Notes for a Poem on Being Asian American” by Dwight Okita
- “Blink Your Eyes” by Sekou Sundiata
- “Puerta Rica” by Victor Hernandez Cruz

Have student groups select a poem from those read over a period of time in class or available in poetry collections in the classroom. They should determine how it will be performed and practice the performance before a day of poetry performance to the class.

Discuss with students how preparing for and doing the performance influenced their understanding and appreciation of poetry.

A Work of Artifice

The bonsai tree
in the attractive pot
could have grown eighty feet tall
on the side of a mountain
till split by lightning.
But a gardener
carefully pruned it.
It is nine inches high.
Every day as he
whittles back the branches
the gardener croons,
It is your nature to be small and cozy,
domestic and weak;
how lucky, little tree,
to have a pot to grow in.
With living creatures
one must begin very early
to dwarf their growth:
the bound feet
the crippled brain,
the hair in curlers,
the hands you
love to touch.

Marge Piercy
To be of use

The people I love the best
jump into work head first
without dallying in the shallows
and swim off with sure strokes almost out of sight.
They seem to become natives of that element,
the black sleek heads of seals
bouncing like half-submerged balls.

I love people who harness themselves, an ox to a heavy cart,
who pull like water buffalo, with massive patience,
who strain in the mud and the muck to move things forward,
who do what has to be done, again and again.

I want to be with people who submerge
in the task, who go into the fields to harvest
and work in a row and pass the bags along,
who are not parlor generals and field deserters
but move in a common rhythm
when the food must come in or the fire be put out.

The work of the world is common as mud.
Botched, it smears the hands, crumbles to dust.
But the thing worth doing well done
has a shape that satisfies, clean and evident.
Greek amphoras for wine or oil,
Hopi vases that held corn, are put in museums
but you know they were made to be used.
The pitcher cries for water to carry
and a person for work that is real.

Marge Piercy
The Compleat Poetry Workshop

POEMS

One Art

The art of losing isn’t hard to master;  
so many things seem filled with the intent  
to be lost that their loss is no disaster.

Lose something every day. Accept the fluster  
of lost door keys, the hour badly spent.  
The art of losing isn’t hard to master.

Then practice losing farther, losing faster:  
places, and names, and where it was you meant  
to travel. None of these will bring disaster.

I lost my mother’s watch. And look! My last, or  
next-to-last, of three loved houses went.  
The art of losing isn’t hard to master.

I lost two cities, lovely ones. And, vaster,  
some realms I owned, two rivers, a continent.  
I miss them, but it wasn’t a disaster.

—Even losing you (the joking voice, a gesture  
I love) I shan’t have lied. It’s evident  
The art of losing’s not too hard to master  
Though it may look like (Write it!) like disaster.

Elizabeth Bishop

The Dog Has Run Off Again

and I should start shouting his name a  
and clapping my hands  
but it has been raining all night  
and the narrow creek has risen  
is a tawny turbulence is rushing along  
over the mossy stones  
is surging forward  
with a sweet loopy music  
and therefore I don’t want to entangle it  
with my own voice  
calling summoning  
my little dog to hurry back  
look the sunlight and the shadows are chasing each other  
listen how the wind swirls and leaps and dives up and down  
who am I to summon his hard and happy body  
his four white feet that love to wheel and pedal  
through the dark leaves  
to come back to walk by my side, obedient.  

Mary Oliver
When Death Comes

When death comes
like the hungry bear in autumn;
when death comes and takes all the bright coins from his purse
to buy me, and snaps the purse shut;
when death comes
like the measles-pox;
when death comes
like an iceberg between the shoulder blades,
I want to step through the door full of curiosity, wondering:
what is it going to be like, that cottage of darkness?

And therefore I look upon everything
as a brotherhood and a sisterhood,
and I look upon time as no more than an idea,
and I consider eternity as another possibility,

and I think of each life as a flower, as common
as a field daisy, and as singular,

and each name a comfortable music in the mouth,
tending, as all music does, toward silence,

and each body a lion of courage, and something
precious to the earth.

When it’s over, I want to say: all my life
I was a bride married to amazement.
I was the bridegroom, taking the world into my arms.
When it’s over, I don’t want to wonder
if I have made of my life something particular, and real.
I don’t want to find myself sighing and frightened,
or full of argument.

I don’t want to end up simply having visited this world.
Mary Oliver

For Valerie

Yesterday, stopped at the traffic light,
this old lady comes over to the bike,
says, ”Could you direct me to the Y?”
I tried, but couldn’t remember street names;
so she puts on the extra helmet
and fifteen minutes later we were there.

Something in the way she held me,
tight about the waist; I knew it was you,
fourty years from now -- a red scarf
and blue jeans -- catching a ride.

Bobbie Copeland
Puerta Rica

Free Puerto Rico
Puerto Rico free
Puerto Rico for $12.50
Puerto Rico on credit
Get some rich port free
free sand and free soil
Free Puerto Rico now
Give away Puerto Rico
for nothing
Port Rich
Rich Port
Rich free
Port free
Puerto Rico for a thousand dollars
Free Puerto Rico now
Free Puerto Rico then
Free Puerto Rico always
Puerto Rico on layaway
Puerto Rico as thing
Puerto Rico as word
Puerto Rico as blood
as water as gold
Puerto Rico as idea
inside of briefcases
Going to colleges
Puerto Rico patches
Puerto Rico buttons
Puerto Rico as flag
waving
Puerto Rico as in the heart
as in the ocean
The sand as hot as
frying pan
Puerto Rico as lament
Puerto Rico as cement
Puerto Rico as my uncles
house
As Julia Maria
As Borinquen
Going from house to house
In the mountains
for more and more soft
Brown legs
Puerto Rico as the corner
where I stood
And when the sugar cane
trucks went thru town
All that fell down
all you could grab
Was free.

Puerto Rico as abuse
ment
As absent from your center of discussion
Puerto Rico as amusement
Puerto Rico free
Puerto Rico as jail
Escape Puerto Rico
like the Maya
Invisible urbanites
take electric
Mayaris
Estudy new ways
not freeways
out of town

Victor Hernandez Cruz

Notes for Poem on Being Asian American

As a child, I was a fussy eater
and I would separate the yolk from the egg white
as I now try to sort out what is Asian
in me from what is American–
the east from the west, the dreamer from the dream.

But countries are not
like eggs – except in the fragileness
of their shells – and eggs resemble countries
only in that when you crack one open and look inside,
you know even less than when you started.
And so I crack open the egg,
and this is what I see:

two moments from my past that strike me
as being uniquely Asian American.
In the first, I’m walking down Michigan Avenue
One day – a man come up to me out of the blue
and says:
“I just wanted to tell you…I was on the plane that
bombed Hiroshima. And I just wanted you to know
that what we did was for the good of everyone.” And it
seems as if he’s asking for my forgiveness. It’s 1983,
and there’s a sale on Marimekko sheets at the Crate &
Barrel, it’s a beautiful summer day and I’m talking to
a man I’ve never seen before and will probably never
see again. His statement has no connection to me—and
has every connection to the world. But it’s not
for me to forgive him. He must forgive himself.
“It must have been a very difficult decision to do what
you did,” I say and mention the sale on Marimekko
sheets across the street, comforters, and how the
pillowcases have the pattern of wheat printed on them,
and how some nights if you hold them before an open
window to the breeze, they might seem like flags—
like someone surrendering after a great while, or
celebrating, or simply cooling themselves in the summer
breeze as best they can.

In the second moment – I’m in a taxi and the Iranian
cabdriver looking into the rearview mirror notices
my Asian eyes, those almond shapes, reflected in the glass
and says, “Can you really tell the difference between
a Chinese and a Japanese?”

And I look at his 3rd World face, his photo I.D. pinned
to the dashboard like a medal, and I think of the eggs
we try to separate, the miles from home he is and the minutes from home I am, and I want to say: “I think it’s more important to find the similarities between people than the differences.” But instead I simply look into the mirror, into his beautiful 3rd World eyes and say, “Mr. Cabdriver, I can barely tell the difference between you and me.”

Dwight Okita
The Parable of the Old Man and the Young

So Abram rose, and clave the wood, and went,  
And took the fire with him, and a knife.  
And as they sojourned both of them together,  
Isaac the first-born spake and said, My father,  
Behold the preparations, fire and iron,  
But where the lamb for this burnt offering?  
Then Abram bound the youth with belts and straps,  
And builded parapets and trenches there,  
And stretched forth the knife to slay his son.  
When lo! an angel called him out of heaven,  
Saying, Lay not thy hand upon the lad,  
Neither do anything to him.  Behold,  
A ram, caught in a thicket by its horns;  
Offer the Ram of Pride instead of him.  
But the old man would not so, but slew his son,  
And half the seed of Europe, one by one.  

Wilfred Owen

Family

My father was brilliant embarrassed funny handsome  
my mother was plain serious principled kind  
my grandmother was intelligent lonesome  
her Other life her dead children silent  
my aunt was beautiful bitter angry loving  
I fell among these adjectives in earliest childhood  
and was nearly buried with opportunity  
some of them stuck to me others finding me American and smooth slipped away  

Grace Paley

The Sacred

After the teacher asked if anyone had a sacred place  
and the students fidgeted and shrunk  
in their chairs, the most serious of them all said it was his car,  
being in it along, his tape deck playing things he’d chosen, and others knew the truth had been spoken  
and began speaking about their rooms,  
their hiding places, but the car kept coming up, the car in motion,  
music filling it, and sometimes one other person who understood the bright altar of the dashboard  
and how far away a car could take him from the need  
to speak, or to answer, the key in having a key and putting it in, and going  

Stephen Dunn

Pitcher

His art is eccentricity, his aim  
How not to hit the mark he seems to aim at,  
His passion how to avoid the obvious,  
His technique how to vary the avoidance.  
The others throw to be comprehended. He Throws to be a moment misunderstood.  
Yet not too much. Not errant, arrant, wild. But every seeming aberration willed.  
Not to, yet still, still to communicate  
Making the batter understand too late  

Robert Francis
Paul Hewitt

Please, sir, I don’t mean to be disrespectful.
I did raise my hand.
I mean, who cares if Macbeth becomes a monster,
if Huck Finn rescues Jim,
If Willie Loman never finds happiness?
They’re just characters in books.
What have they got to do with me?
I mean, I’m never going hunting for white whales.
I’m never going to fight in the Civil War.
And I certainly don’t live in the Dust Bowl.
Tell me instead how to
Make money, pick up girls.
Then maybe I’ll listen.
You got any books that deal with real life?
Mel Glenn

Without Title

For my Father who lived without ceremony

It’s hard you know without the buffalo,
the shaman, the arrow,
but my father went out each day to hunt
as though he had them.
He worked in the stockyards.
All his life he brought us meat.
No one marked his first kill,
no one sang his buffalo song.
Without a vision he had migrated to the city
and went to work in the packing house.
When he brought home his horns and hides
my mother said
get rid of them.
I remember the animal tracks of his car
backing out the drive in snow and mud,
the aerial on his old car waving
like a bow string.
I remember the silence of his lost power,
the red buffalo painted on his chest.
Oh, I couldn’t see it
but it was there, and in the night I heard
his buffalo grunts like a snore.
Diane Glancy

My Father’s Hands

I have hands like my father,
always in motion.
Stirring sugared coffee
before hoeing his rows of beans.
He grew the best chili,
the hottest were his pride,
pointing to the fresh ones,
he’d laugh and say,
“Heat and mean like me.”

He was stabbed once in a fight
in the center of his right palm,
damaging his fingers,
that never fully healed.
His middle finger slanted stiffly inward,
though his grip remained firm.
Such stead hands my father had,
carving
past midnight
into Gia’s black bowls.
Drawing perfect lines
in delicate strokes,
a simple pocketknife his only tool.

His were the hands that lifted me,
when I was just a girl,
tugging playfully at my hair,
that curled behind my ear.
His hands,
narrow and skilled,
copper colored and calloused,
weather chapped and strong.

I have hands like my father,
I know this myself,
but like hearing my daughter say so.
Nora Naranjo-Morse
Barbie Says Math Is Hard

As a boy, I’d still have asked why Jack must spend exactly two dollars at the corner store. Give him a coin purse is as good an answer as five apples and two oranges. Also: would he bake the apples into pies or cobblers, save the orange peel in glass jars to spice up his tea or cake? If his father paints their house with Mr. Jones which man will take the peaks and why? Would the raspberry beetles swarm over wet paint? Why is Mr. Jones slower than his neighbor? If x equals y, is it like putting apples into cole slaw, the way a tomato is really a fruit? None of my dolls talked or grew hair. In third grade, Satsuki and I traded our Barbies’ limbs so mine could flex her left biceps while hers sat cross-legged raising one still arm like a weapon. If Satsuki has daughters, she might remember the grasshoppers we caught, how we cupped two hands together into crooked globes to hear them rattling inside like a small motor. She would tell her daughters: Yes, math was hard, but not because we were girls.

Kyoko Mori

The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner

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, I woke to black flak and the nightmare fighters. When I died, they washed me out of the turret with a hose.

Randall Jarrell
The Dog Ate My Homework

The dog ate my homework. You've heard that before? This one ate the table, then chewed through the door.

Broke into the living room with his munch mouth, snacked on some carpet, and lunched on the couch.

He chewed up some albums, then swallowed the mail, even ate pretzels, 'though they were stale.

He garbaged down everything left in his path and still wasn't full when he found my math.

He chewed tops off bottles then drank all the pop. as far as I know, he still hasn't stopped.

If you don't believe me, then give Mom a call, if she still has a kitchen or phone on the wall.

She'll answer and tell you my story is true. The dog ate my homework. What could I do? Sara Holbrook

For the Anniversary of My Death

Every year without knowing it I have passed the day
When the last fires will wave to me
And the silence will set out
Tireless traveler
Like the beam of a lightless star

Then I will no longer
Find myself in life as in a strange garment
Surprised at the earth
And the love of one woman
And the shamelessness of men
As today writing after three days of rain
Hearing the wren sing and the falling cease
And bowing not knowing to what

W. S. Merwin

My Desk

If my desk weren't such a mess, I could find my organizer.
If my desk weren't such a mess I'd be quicker, smarter, wiser.

Picture an abyss, bottomless and black, jammed and overflowing, inkless pens and wrinkled stacks of papers (uncompleted), candy wrappers, salad tossed with petrifying carrots, leaking glue and what-got-lost.

It's hard to stay on task when tasks are buried six-feet-deep. I'm always playing catch-up, overdue and under neat.

Honor Roll won't happen while I'm squirreling through this mess. But if this desk were neat and straight, well then, it wouldn't be my desk.

Sara Holbrook
After English Class

I used to like “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening.”
I liked the coming darkness,
The jingle of harness bells, breaking—and adding to—the stillness,
The gentle drift of snow…

But today, the teacher told us what everything stood for.
The woods, the horse the miles to go, the sleep—
They all have “hidden meanings.”

It’s grown so complicated now that,
Next time I drive by,
I don’t think I’ll bother to stop.
Jean Little

Maybe

If I stretch myself tall
as a tree, if I sway
and pull my stomach in
until it touches my spine
and curl my hair into a river
of light, if I borrow
my sister’s dress that whispers
when I glide without touching
the floor, and if I try a laugh
that ripples green with mystery;
maybe he’ll forget it’s just me
hiding inside.
Pat Mora

Sonrisas¹

I live in a doorway
between two rooms. I hear
quiet clicks, cups of black
coffee, click, click like facts
budgets, tenure, curriculum,
from careful women in crisp beige
suits, quick beige smiles
that seldom sneak into their eyes.

I peek
in the other room. Señoras
in faded dresses stir sweet
milk coffee. Laughter whirls
with steam from fresh tamales.
Sh, sh, mucho o
they scold one another,
press their lips, trap smiles
in their dark, Mexican eyes.
Pat Mora

¹ Smiles

Childhood of the Ancients

Hard? You don’t know what hard is, boy:
When I was your age we got up in pitch dark,
and walked five miles to school and ten miles back,
uphill both ways, and all we had for lunch
was a cold sweet potato and dry cornbread.
And when we got back home your grandma made us
chop cotton, slop the hogs, then milk the chickens
before supper, and all we had to eat
was chicken-fried pine straw and redeye gravy.
Maybe some turnip greens. Maybe some collards.
But what do you know? Shoot, you’ve always had
hot food plopped in front of you, like magic.
For you, it’s all ice cream and soda pop.
Andrew Hudgings

Tree

I’d like to be a tree. My father clinked
his fork down on his plate and stared at me.
“Boy, sometimes you say the dumbest things.”
You ought to know, I muttered, and got backhanded
out of my chair. Nowadays, when I chop wood
and my hands gum with resin and bark flakes,
I hunker at the tap and wash them human.
But in math class, I’d daydream of my choices:
not hickory or cedar, not an oak—
post, red, live, pin, or water oak, Just pine.
If not longleaf, I’d settle for loblolly.
My skin would thicken with harsh bark, my limbs
sprout twigs, my twigs sprout elegant green needles.
Too soon, Miz Gorrie’d call on me. “Why did
you do step four that way?” Who me? Step four?
“Yes, Andrew, you. Step four.” Beats me. It looked
good at the time, I guess—and got invited
to come back after school and guess again.
And that’s when I decided it: scrub pine.
Andrew Hudgings
Gretel

said she didn’t know anything about ovens,
so the witch crawled in to show her
and Bam! went the big door.

Then she strolled out to the shed where
her brother was fattening, knocked down
a wall, and lifted him high in the air.

Not long after the adventure in the forest,
Gretel married so she could live happily.
Her husband was soft like Hansel. Her
husband liked to eat.

Ever after was the size of a kitchen.
Gretel remembered when times were better.
She’d laughed out loud when the witch
popped like a weenie.

“Gretel! Stop fooling around and fix
my dinner.”

“There’s something wrong with this oven,”
she says, her eyes bright as treasure.
“Can you come here a minute?”

Ron Koertge

The Gift

To pull the metal splinter from my palm
my father recited a story in a low voice.
I watched his lovely face and not the blade.
Before the story ended, he’d removed
the iron sliver I thought I’d die from.

I can’t remember the tale,
but hear his voice still, a well
of dark water, a prayer.
And I recall his hands,
two measures of tenderness
he laid against my face,
the flames of discipline
he raised above my head.

Had you entered that afternoon
you would have thought you saw a man
planting something in a boy’s palm,
a silver tear, a tiny flame.
Had you followed that boy
you would have arrived here,
where I bend over my wife’s right hand.

Look how I shaver her thumbnail down
so carefully she feels no pain.
Watch as I lift the splinter out.
I was seven when my father
took my hand like this,
and I did not hold that shard
between my fingers and think,
Metal that will bury me,
Christen it Little Assassin,
Ore Going Deep for My heart.

And I did not lift up my wound and cry,
Death visited here!
I did what a child does
when he’s given something to keep.
I kissed my father.

Li-Young Lee

A Story

Sad is the man who is asked
for a story
and can’t come up with one.

His five-year-old son waits in
his lap.
Not the same story, Baba. A
new one.
The man rubs his chin,
scratches his ear.

In a room full of books in a
world
of stories, he can recall
not one, and soon, he thinks,
the boy
with give up on his father.

Already the man lives far
ahead, he sees
the day the boy will go. Don’t
go!
Hear the alligator story! The
angel story once more!
You love the spider story.
You laugh at the spider.
Let me tell it!

But the boy is packing his
shirts,
he is looking for his keys. Are
you a god,
the man screams, that I sit
mute before you?
Am I a god that I should
never disappoint?

But the boy is here. Please,
Baba, a story?
It is an emotional rather than
logical equation,
an earthly rather than
heavenly one,
which posits that a boy’s
supplications
and a father’s love add up to
silence.

Li-Young Lee
Abandoned Farmhouse

He was a big man, says the size of his shoes
on a pile of broken dishes by the house;
a tall man too, says the length of the bed in an upstairs room;
and a good, God-fearing man,
says the Bible with a broken back
on the floor below a window, bright with sun;
but not a man for farming, say the fields
cluttered with boulders and a leaky barn.

A woman lived with him, says the bedroom wall
papered with lilacs and the kitchen shelves
covered with oilcloth, and they had a child
says the sandbox made from a tractor tire.
Money was scarce, say the jars of plum preserves
and canned tomatoes sealed in the cellar hole,
and the winters cold, say the rags in the window frames.
It was lonely here, says the narrow country road.

Something went wrong, says the empty house
in the weed-choked yard. Stones in the fields
say he was not a farmer; the still-sealed jars
in the cellar say she left in a nervous haste.
And the child? Its toys are strewn in the yard
like branches after a storm—a rubber cow,
a rusty tractor and a broken plow,
a doll in overalls. Something went wrong, they say.

Ted Kooser

Myrtle

Wearing her yellow rubber slicker,
Myrtle, our Journal carrier,
has come early through rain and darkness
to bring us the news.
A woman of thirty or so,
with three small children at home,
she’s told me she likes
a long walk by herself in the morning.
And with pride in her work,
she’s wrapped the news neatly in plastic—
a bread bag, beaded with rain,
that reads WONDER.
From my doorway I watch her
flicker from porch to porch as she goes,
a yellow candle flame
no wind or weather dare extinguish.
Ted Kooser

Dear Dracula

This diet of yours is so cool. Just a few pints a day
and I’m like really thin. My old boyfriends are totally
after me now, but no way! All they ever wanted was
you-know-what and make it quick. God, the way you
licked my wrist! You took hours.

I told my mom those holes in my neck were a fad,
like nose rings. She bought it! And don’t worry
about Dad. He’s so checked out, the walking
dead if you know what I mean.
I can’t wait for tonight, Count D. I love it
when you do that thing with your cape!
And then we have to chat. My folks are after
me to go to city college. But now I couldn’t
stay awake in class, anyway, and if I’m going
to live forever, what’s the hurry, right?

I’ve been thinking, though. I want to be special,
not just another long, white neck. Let’s face it. You’re
like 9000 years older than me. You’ve really been
around. So maybe when we fly back to your castle
in Pennsylvania, I should at least go to night school.

We’ll talk, okay? Right now I have to put the crucifix
away, throw a towel over the mirror, then get into
my jammies. Oh, and brush my teeth which, I have
to tell you, seems to take a little longer all the time.

Ron Koertge
Wartime

The door closes the day to us at six.
Cloistered, we are mere shadows behind the blackened and pinned-down windows.
The houselights direct their small, concentrated beams in bald circles on the table tops.
Mother has dinner on the table by then, and steam from the rice and the thin clicks of chopsticks sever the dark silence.
Gas masks for the adults and “bunny” masks for the children hang on the wall like insects.
We go to bed early.
We learn the dance of shadows on the ceilings, the urgency of a curfew.
Only Mother stays up.
She writes long, unanswered letters to interned relatives.
She reads or crochets.
Her ears become keen in the silent music of waiting and her eyes grow sharp but distant. They glisten.
It has been a long time since she’s been outside to gaze at the expanse of the heavens; she aches for a look at the stars and the moon.

Internment

Corralled, they are herded inland from Santa Rosa.
After the long train ride on the Santa Fe, the physical exam, the delousing with DDT, the branding of her indignation, she falls asleep.

Days later, she awakens in an unfamiliar barracks—Crystal City, Texas—on land once a pasture.
Not wanting to, not meaning to see beauty in this stark landscape, she sees, nonetheless, through her tears on the double row of barbed wire fencing which holds them in like stolid cattle, dewdrops, impaled and golden.

Juliet S. Kono