5 Home and Family

> “Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.”
>
> — Leo Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina*

Art Debat / Getty Images

What makes a house a home? “Home” suggests sanctuary, loved ones, nourishment — a place where everybody knows your name. The term is woven deep into our language as well as our consciousness. Consider the connotations of *homemade* and *homespun*. Home can offer refuge from the hostile world, or it can be a prison. People living together inevitably — sometimes intentionally — rub one another the wrong way. This chafing provides writers with rich material for art. (Remember, without conflict there is no story.) Are these writers working through their own failed relationships with mothers, fathers, and siblings? Sometimes. Are they exploring their conflicted feelings toward a home they left behind? Maybe. Are they holding up a mirror that allows us to see our own homes and families in a new light? Most certainly.

Though the trappings of home and family differ across cultures, human families have much in common. Legend has it that a man from Czechoslovakia, after watching a production of August Wilson’s *Fences* (set in Pittsburgh in the 1950s), approached the playwright and asked him, “How did you know about my family?” Wilson may not have known that particular man’s family, but he knew about families and how the sins of the father play out in the lives of sons.

The readings in this chapter explore the theme of home and family within a broad range of contexts. Franz Kafka's modernist masterpiece, *The Metamorphosis*, is told from the point of view of a son whose transformation into a large bug renders him unable to support his middle-class family in the rapidly changing cityscape they call home. You'll also find several selections of modernist fiction, poetry, and art that reflect early twentieth–century perceptions of human experience, particularly in urban centers — these works will help you explore the place *The Metamorphosis* occupies within modernist tradition. In Langston Hughes's poem "Mother to Son," the speaker uses her own suffering as an example to chide her son, "So boy, don't you turn back. / Don't you set down on the steps / 'Cause you finds it's kinder hard." Alice Munro's "The Progress of Love" looks at family through the stories characters tell, retell, and revise about their shared memories. Let the literature on the following pages take you into other homes and families so that you can return to your own with new eyes.

Fences

AUGUST WILSON

AP Photo / Ted S. Warren

August Wilson (1945–2005) was born in Pittsburgh to a white father and an African American mother. When his father died in 1965, he changed his legal name (Frederick August Kittel) to August Wilson, assuming his mother's maiden name. Brought up by his mother, he spent his early years in the Hill — a poor, multiracial district of Pittsburgh, the setting for his later work. His formal education ended when he dropped out of high school at the age of fifteen. He was largely self-educated, becoming acquainted with the works of leading African American writers through the Carnegie Library. He cofounded the Black Horizon Theater in the Hill District in 1968, and vowed to become a writer. This ambition was realized during the 1980s, when Wilson began writing *The Pittsburgh Cycle* — a remarkable collection of partially interconnected plays. Collectively, the plays portray the twentieth century from an African American perspective. The cycle garnered many awards, including two Pulitzer Prizes (for *Fences* in 1985 and *The Piano Lesson* in 1989); the tenth and final play, *Radio Golf*, was performed a few months before his death. Wilson's influence lies in his ability, through larger-than-life characters and intense, perceptive characterization, to create a universal dimension in which issues of race and family in America are examined. In *Fences*, Troy Maxson embodies one of those larger-than-life characters.

For Lloyd Richards, who adds to whatever he touches

When the sins of our fathers visit us
We do not have to play host.
We can banish them with forgiveness
As God, in His Largeness and Laws.

— AUGUST WILSON

Characters

TROY MAXSON
JIM BONO, *Troy's friend*
ROSE, *Troy's wife*
LYONS, *Troy's oldest son by previous marriage*
GABRIEL, *Troy's brother*
CORY, *Troy and Rose's son*
RAYNELL, *Troy's daughter*

SETTING The setting is the yard which fronts the only entrance to the Maxson household, an ancient two-story brick house set back off a small alley in a big-city neighborhood. The entrance to the house is gained by two or three steps leading to a wooden porch badly in need of paint.

A relatively recent addition to the house and running its full width, the porch lacks congruence. It is a sturdy porch with a flat roof. One or two chairs of dubious value sit at one end where the kitchen window opens onto the porch. An old-fashioned icebox stands silent guard at the opposite end.

The yard is a small dirt yard, partially fenced, except for the last scene, with a wooden sawhorse, a pile of lumber, and other fence-building

equipment set off to the side. Opposite is a tree from which hangs a ball made of rags. A baseball bat leans against the tree. Two oil drums serve as garbage receptacles and sit near the house at right to complete the setting.

THE PLAY Near the turn of the century, the destitute of Europe sprang on the city with tenacious claws and an honest and solid dream. The city devoured them. They swelled its belly until it burst into a thousand furnaces and sewing machines, a thousand butcher shops and bakers' ovens, a thousand churches and hospitals and funeral parlors and money-lenders. The city grew. It nourished itself and offered each man a partnership limited only by his talent, his guile, and his willingness and capacity for hard work. For the immigrants of Europe, a dream dared and won true.

The descendants of African slaves were offered no such welcome or participation. They came from places called the Carolinas and the Virginias, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, and Tennessee. They came strong, eager, searching. The city rejected them and they fled and settled along the riverbanks and under bridges in shallow, ramshackle houses made of sticks and tarpaper. They collected rags and wood. They sold the use of their muscles and their bodies. They cleaned houses and washed clothes, they shined shoes, and in quiet desperation and vengeful pride, they stole, and lived in pursuit of their own dream. That they could breathe free, finally, and stand to meet life with the force of dignity and whatever eloquence the heart could call upon.

By 1957, the hard-won victories of the European immigrants had solidified the industrial might of America. War had been confronted and won with new energies that used loyalty and patriotism as its fuel. Life was rich, full, and flourishing. The Milwaukee Braves won the World Series, and the hot winds of change that would make the sixties a turbulent, racing, dangerous, and provocative decade had not yet begun to blow full.

ACT I

Scene 1

It is 1957. **TROY** *and* **BONO** *enter the yard, engaged in conversation.* **TROY** *is fifty-three years old, a large man with thick, heavy hands; it is this largeness that he strives to fill out and make an accommodation with. Together with his blackness, his largeness informs his sensibilities and the choices he has made in his life.*

Of the two men, **BONO** *is obviously the follower. His commitment to their friendship of thirty-odd years is rooted in his admiration of* **TROY***'s honesty, capacity for hard work, and his strength, which* **BONO** *seeks to emulate.*

It is Friday night, payday, and the one night of the week the two men engage in a ritual of talk and drink. **TROY** *is usually the most talkative and at times he can be crude and almost vulgar, though he is capable of rising to profound heights of expression. The men carry lunch buckets and wear or carry burlap aprons and are dressed in clothes suitable to their jobs as garbage collectors.*

BONO Troy, you ought to stop that lying!

TROY I ain't lying! The nigger had a watermelon this big. (*He indicates with his hands.*) Talking about . . . "What watermelon, Mr. Rand?" I liked to fell out! "What watermelon, Mr. Rand?" . . . And it sitting there big as life.

BONO What did Mr. Rand say?

TROY Ain't said nothing. Figure if the nigger too dumb to know he carrying a watermelon, he wasn't gonna get much sense out of him. Trying to hide that great big old watermelon under his coat. Afraid to let the white man see him carry it home.

BONO I'm like you . . . I ain't got no time for them kind of people.

TROY Now what he look like getting mad cause he see the man from the union talking to Mr. Rand?

BONO He come to me talking about . . . "Maxson gonna get us fired." I told him to get

away from me with that. He walked away from me calling you a troublemaker. What Mr. Rand say?

TROY Ain't said nothing. He told me to go down the Commissioner's office next Friday. They called me down there to see them.

BONO Well, as long as you got your complaint filed, they can't fire you. That's what one of them white fellows tell me.

TROY I ain't worried about them firing me. They gonna fire me cause I asked a question? That's all I did. I went to Mr. Rand and asked him, "Why? Why you got the white mens driving and the colored lifting?" Told him, "What's the matter, don't I count? You think only white fellows got sense enough to drive a truck. That ain't no paper job! Hell, anybody can drive a truck. How come you got all whites driving and the colored lifting?" He told me "take it to the union." Well, hell, that's what I done! Now they wanna come up with this pack of lies.

BONO I told Brownie if the man come and ask him any questions . . . just tell the truth! It ain't nothing but something they done trumped up on you cause you filed a complaint on them.

TROY Brownie don't understand nothing. All I want them to do is change the job description. Give everybody a chance to drive the truck. Brownie can't see that. He ain't got that much sense.

BONO How you figure he be making out with that gal be up at Taylors' all the time . . . that Alberta gal?

TROY Same as you and me. Getting just as much as we is. Which is to say nothing.

BONO It is, huh? I figure you doing a little better than me . . . and I ain't saying what I'm doing.

TROY Aw, nigger, look here . . . I know you. If you had got anywhere near that gal, twenty minutes later you be looking to tell somebody. And the first one you gonna tell . . . that you gonna want to brag to . . . is me.

BONO I ain't saying that. I see where you be eyeing her.

TROY I eye all the women. I don't miss nothing. Don't never let nobody tell you Troy Maxson don't eye the women.

BONO You been doing more than eyeing her. You done bought her a drink or two.

TROY Hell yeah, I bought her a drink! What that mean? I bought you one, too. What that mean cause I buy her a drink? I'm just being polite.

BONO It's all right to buy her one drink. That's what you call being polite. But when you wanna be buying two or three . . . that's what you call eyeing her.

TROY Look here, as long as you known me . . . you ever known me to chase after women?

BONO Hell yeah! Long as I done known you. You forgetting I knew you when.

TROY Naw, I'm talking about since I been married to Rose?

BONO Oh, not since you been married to Rose. Now, that's the truth, there. I can say that.

TROY All right then! Case closed.

BONO I see you be walking up around Alberta's house. You supposed to be at Taylors' and you be walking up around there.

TROY What you watching where I'm walking for? I ain't watching after you.

BONO I seen you walking around there more than once.

TROY Hell, you liable to see me walking anywhere! That don't mean nothing cause you see me walking around there.

BONO Where she come from anyway? She just kinda showed up one day.

TROY Tallahassee. You can look at her and tell she one of them Florida gals. They got some big healthy women down there. Grow them right up out the ground. Got a little bit of Indian in her. Most of them niggers down in Florida got some Indian in them.

BONO I don't know about that Indian part. But she damn sure big and healthy. Woman wear some big stockings. Got them great big old legs and hips as wide as the Mississippi River.

TROY Legs don't mean nothing. You don't do nothing but push them out of the way. But them hips cushion the ride!

BONO Troy, you ain't got no sense.

TROY It's the truth! Like you riding on Goodyears!

ROSE *enters from the house. She is ten years younger than* **TROY**, *her devotion to him stems from her recognition of the possibilities of her life without him: a succession of abusive men and their babies, a life of partying and running the streets, the Church, or aloneness with its attendant pain and frustration. She recognizes* **TROY**'*s spirit as a fine and illuminating one and she either ignores or forgives his faults, only some of which she recognizes. Though she doesn't drink, her presence is an integral part of the Friday night rituals. She alternates between the porch and the kitchen, where supper preparations are under way.*

ROSE What you all out here getting into?

TROY What you worried about what we getting into for? This is men talk, woman.

ROSE What I care what you all talking about? Bono, you gonna stay for supper?

BONO No, I thank you, Rose. But Lucille say she cooking up a pot of pigfeet.

TROY Pigfeet! Hell, I'm going home with you! Might even stay the night if you got some pigfeet. You got something in there to top them pigfeet, Rose?

ROSE I'm cooking up some chicken. I got some chicken and collard greens.

TROY Well, go on back in the house and let me and Bono finish what we was talking about. This is men talk. I got some talk for you later. You know what kind of talk I mean. You go on and powder it up.

ROSE Troy Maxson, don't you start that now!

TROY (*puts his arm around her*): Aw, woman . . . come here. Look here, Bono . . . when I met this woman . . . I got out that place, say, "Hitch up my pony, saddle up my mare . . . there's a woman out there for me somewhere. I looked here. Looked there. Saw Rose and latched on to her." I latched on to her and told her — I'm gonna tell you the truth — I told her, "Baby, I don't wanna marry, I just wanna be your man." Rose told me . . . tell him what you told me, Rose.

ROSE I told him if he wasn't the marrying kind, then move out the way so the marrying kind could find me.

TROY That's what she told me. "Nigger, you in my way. You blocking the view! Move out the way so I can find me a husband." I thought it over two or three days. Come back —

ROSE Ain't no two or three days nothing. You was back the same night.

TROY Come back, told her . . . "Okay, baby . . . but I'm gonna buy me a banty rooster and put him out there in the backyard . . . and when he see a stranger come, he'll flap his wings and crow . . ." Look here, Bono, I could watch the front door by myself . . . it was that back door I was worried about.

ROSE Troy, you ought not talk like that. Troy ain't doing nothing but telling a lie.

TROY Only thing is . . . when we first got married . . . forget the rooster . . . we ain't had no yard!

BONO I hear you tell it. Me and Lucille was staying down there on Logan Street. Had two rooms with the outhouse in the back. I ain't mind the outhouse none. But when that goddamn wind blow through there in the winter . . . that's what I'm talking about! To this day I wonder why in the hell I ever stayed down there for six long years. But see, I didn't know I could do no better. I thought only white folks had inside toilets and things.

ROSE There's a lot of people don't know they can do no better than they doing now. That's just something you got to learn. A lot of folks still shop at Bella's.

TROY Ain't nothing wrong with shopping at Bella's. She got fresh food.

ROSE I ain't said nothing about if she got fresh food. I'm talking about what she charge. She charge ten cents more than the A&P.

TROY The A&P ain't never done nothing for me. I spends my money where I'm treated right. I go down to Bella, say, "I need a loaf of bread, I'll pay you Friday." She give it to me. What sense that make when I got money to go and spend it somewhere else and ignore the person who done right by me? That ain't in the Bible.

ROSE We ain't talking about what's in the Bible. What sense it make to shop there when she overcharge?

TROY You shop where you want to. I'll do my shopping where the people been good to me.

ROSE Well, I don't think it's right for her to overcharge. That's all I was saying.

BONO Look here . . . I got to get on. Lucille going be raising all kind of hell.

TROY Where you going, nigger? We ain't finished this pint. Come here, finish this pint.

BONO Well, hell, I am . . . if you ever turn the bottle loose.

TROY (*hands him the bottle*): The only thing I say about the A&P is I'm glad Cory got that job down there. Help him take care of his school clothes and things. Gabe done moved out and things getting tight around here. He got that job. . . . He can start to look out for himself.

ROSE Cory done went and got recruited by a college football team.

TROY I told that boy about that football stuff. The white man ain't gonna let him get nowhere with that football. I told him when he first come to me with it. Now you come telling me he done went and got more tied up in it. He ought to go and get recruited in how to fix cars or something where he can make a living.

ROSE He ain't talking about making no living playing football. It's just something the boys in school do. They gonna send a recruiter by to talk to you. He'll tell you he ain't talking about making no living playing football. It's a honor to be recruited.

TROY It ain't gonna get him nowhere. Bono'll tell you that.

BONO If he be like you in the sports . . . he's gonna be all right. Ain't but two men ever played baseball as good as you. That's Babe Ruth and Josh Gibson.[1] Them's the only two men ever hit more home runs than you.

TROY What it ever get me? Ain't got a pot to piss in or a window to throw it out of.

ROSE Times have changed since you was playing baseball, Troy. That was before the war. Times have changed a lot since then.

TROY How in hell they done changed?

ROSE They got lots of colored boys playing ball now. Baseball and football.

BONO You right about that, Rose. Times have changed, Troy. You just come along too early.

TROY There ought not never have been no time called too early! Now you take that fellow . . . what's that fellow they had playing right field for the Yankees back then? You know who I'm talking about, Bono. Used to play right field for the Yankees.

ROSE Selkirk?

TROY Selkirk! That's it! Man batting .269, understand? .269. What kind of sense that make? I was hitting .432 with thirty-seven home runs! Man batting .269 and playing right field for the Yankees! I saw Josh Gibson's daughter yesterday. She walking around with raggedy shoes on her feet. Now I bet you Selkirk's daughter ain't walking around with raggedy shoes on her feet! I bet you that!

[1] Josh Gibson (1911–1947) was a baseball player in the Negro leagues. — EDS.

ROSE They got a lot of colored baseball players now. Jackie Robinson was the first. Folks had to wait for Jackie Robinson.

TROY I done seen a hundred niggers play baseball better than Jackie Robinson. Hell, I know some teams Jackie Robinson couldn't even make! What you talking about Jackie Robinson. Jackie Robinson wasn't nobody. I'm talking about if you could play ball then they ought to have let you play. Don't care what color you were. Come telling me I come along too early. If you could play . . . then they ought to have let you play.

TROY *takes a long drink from the bottle.*

ROSE You gonna drink yourself to death. You don't need to be drinking like that.

TROY Death ain't nothing. I done seen him. Done wrassled with him. You can't tell me nothing about death. Death ain't nothing but a fastball on the outside corner. And you know what I'll do to that! Lookee here, Bono . . . am I lying? You get one of them fastballs, about waist high, over the outside corner of the plate where you can get the meat of the bat on it . . . and good god! You can kiss it goodbye. Now, am I lying?

BONO Naw, you telling the truth there. I seen you do it.

TROY If I'm lying . . . that 450 feet worth of lying! (*Pause.*) That's all death is to me. A fastball on the outside corner.

ROSE I don't know why you want to get on talking about death.

TROY Ain't nothing wrong with talking about death. That's part of life. Everybody gonna die. You gonna die, I'm gonna die. Bono's gonna die. Hell, we all gonna die.

ROSE But you ain't got to talk about it. I don't like to talk about it.

TROY You the one brought it up. Me and Bono was talking about baseball . . . you tell me I'm gonna drink myself to death. Ain't that right, Bono? You know I don't drink this but one night out of the week. That's Friday night. I'm gonna drink just enough to where I can handle it. Then I cuts it loose. I leave it alone. So don't you worry about me drinking myself to death. 'Cause I ain't worried about Death. I done seen him. I done wrestled with him.

Look here, Bono . . . I looked up one day and Death was marching straight at me. Like Soldiers on Parade! The Army of Death was marching straight at me. The middle of July, 1941. It got real cold just like it be winter. It seem like Death himself reached out and touched me on the shoulder. He touch me just like I touch you. I got cold as ice and Death standing there grinning at me.

ROSE Troy, why don't you hush that talk.

TROY I say . . . what you want, Mr. Death? You be wanting me? You done brought your army to be getting me? I looked him dead in the eye. I wasn't fearing nothing. I was ready to tangle. Just like I'm ready to tangle now. The Bible say be ever vigilant. That's why I don't get but so drunk. I got to keep watch.

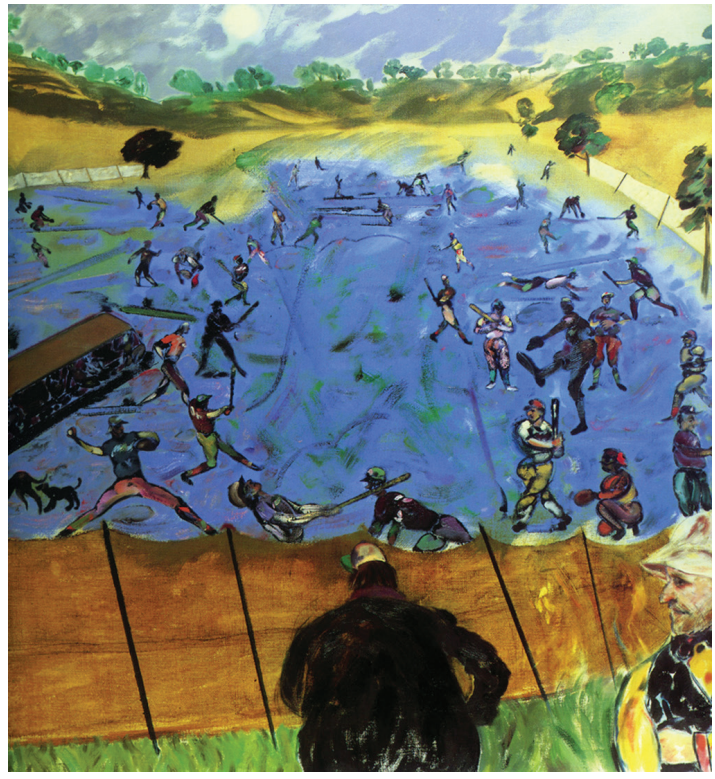
ROSE Troy was right down there in Mercy Hospital. You remember he had pneumonia? Laying there with a fever talking plumb out of his head.

TROY Death standing there staring at me . . . carrying that sickle in his hand. Finally he say, "You want bound over for another year?" See, just like that . . . "You want bound over for another year?" I told him, "Bound over hell! Let's settle this now!"

It seem like he kinda fell back when I said that, and all the cold went out of me. I reached down and grabbed that sickle and threw it just as far as I could throw it . . . and me and him commenced to wrestling.

We wrestled for three days and three nights. I can't say where I found the strength from. Every time it seemed like he was gonna get the best of me, I'd reach way down deep inside myself and find the strength to do him one better.

In this painting entitled *Amerika* (*Baseball*), how does artist R. B. Kitaj introduce elements of threat and menace? How does his depiction of baseball reflect or challenge Troy Maxson's relationship with the sport?



R. B. Kitaj, Amerika (Baseball), 1983–1984. Oil on canvas. 58 × 58 inches. Collection Yale University Art Gallery.
© the Estate of R. B. Kitaj, Courtesy Marlborough Gallery, New York.

ROSE Every time Troy tell that story he find different ways to tell it. Different things to make up about it.

TROY I ain't making up nothing. I'm telling you the facts of what happened. I wrestled with Death for three days and three nights and I'm standing here to tell you about it. (*Pause.*) All right. At the end of the third night we done weakened each other to where we can't hardly move. Death stood up, throwed on his robe . . . had him a white robe with a hood on it. He throwed on that robe and went off to look for his sickle. Say, "I'll be back." Just like that. "I'll be back." I told him, say, "Yeah, but . . . you gonna have to find me!" I wasn't no fool. I wan't going looking for him. Death ain't nothing to play with. And I know he's gonna get me. I know I got to join his army . . . his camp followers. But as long as I keep my strength and see him coming . . . as long as I keep up my vigilance . . . he's gonna have to fight to get me. I ain't going easy.

BONO Well, look here, since you got to keep up your vigilance . . . let me have the bottle.

TROY Aw hell, I shouldn't have told you that part. I should have left out that part.

ROSE Troy be talking that stuff and half the time don't even know what he be talking about.

TROY Bono know me better than that.

BONO That's right. I know you. I know you got some Uncle Remus[2]

[2] Fictional narrator in books by Joel Chandler Harris that retell traditional black folktales featuring Brer Rabbit. — EDS.

in your blood. You got more stories than the devil got sinners.

TROY Aw hell, I done seen him too! Done talked with the devil.

ROSE Troy, don't nobody wanna be hearing all that stuff.

LYONS *enters the yard from the street. Thirty-four years old,* **TROY***'s son by a previous marriage, he sports a neatly trimmed goatee, sport coat, white shirt, tieless and buttoned at the collar. Though he fancies himself a musician, he is more caught up in the rituals and "idea" of being a musician than in the actual practice of the music. He has come to borrow money from* **TROY***, and while he knows he will be successful, he is uncertain as to what extent his lifestyle will be held up to scrutiny and ridicule.*

LYONS Hey, Pop.

TROY What you come "Hey, Popping" me for?

LYONS How you doing, Rose? (*He kisses her.*) Mr. Bono. How you doing?

BONO Hey, Lyons . . . how you been?

TROY He must have been doing all right. I ain't seen him around here last week.

ROSE Troy, leave your boy alone. He come by to see you and you wanna start all that nonsense.

TROY I ain't bothering Lyons. (*Offers him the bottle.*) Here . . . get you a drink. We got an understanding. I know why he come by to see me and he know I know.

LYONS Come on, Pop . . . I just stopped by to say hi . . . see how you was doing.

TROY You ain't stopped by yesterday.

ROSE You gonna stay for supper, Lyons? I got some chicken cooking in the oven.

LYONS No, Rose . . . thanks. I was just in the neighborhood and thought I'd stop by for a minute.

TROY You was in the neighborhood all right, nigger. You telling the truth there. You was in the neighborhood cause it's my payday.

LYONS Well, hell, since you mentioned it . . . let me have ten dollars.

TROY I'll be damned! I'll die and go to hell and play blackjack with the devil before I give you ten dollars.

BONO That's what I wanna know about . . . that devil you done seen.

LYONS What . . . Pop done seen the devil? You too much, Pops.

TROY Yeah, I done seen him. Talked to him too!

ROSE You ain't seen no devil. I done told you that man ain't had nothing to do with the devil. Anything you can't understand, you want to call it the devil.

TROY Look here, Bono . . . I went down to see Hertzberger about some furniture. Got three rooms for two-ninety-eight. That what it say on the radio. "Three rooms . . . two-ninety-eight." Even made up a little song about it. Go down there . . . man tell me I can't get no credit. I'm working every day and can't get no credit. What to do? I got an empty house with some raggedy furniture in it. Cory ain't got no bed. He's sleeping on a pile of rags on the floor. Working every day and can't get no credit. Come back here — Rose'll tell you — madder than hell. Sit down . . . try to figure what I'm gonna do. Come a knock on the door. Ain't been living here but three days. Who know I'm here? Open the door . . . devil standing there bigger than life. White fellow . . . white fellow . . . got on good clothes and everything. Standing there with a clipboard in his hand. I ain't had to say nothing. First words come out of his mouth was . . . "I understand you need some furniture and can't get no credit." I liked to fell over. He say, "I'll give you all the credit you want, but you got to pay the interest on it." I told him, "Give me three rooms worth and charge whatever you want." Next day a truck pulled up here and two men unloaded them three rooms. Man what drove the truck give me a book. Say send ten dollars, first of every month to the address in the book and everything will be all right. Say if I miss a

payment the devil was coming back and it'll be hell to pay. That was fifteen years ago. To this day . . . the first of the month I send my ten dollars, Rose'll tell you.

ROSE Troy lying.

TROY I ain't never seen that man since. Now you tell me who else that could have been but the devil? I ain't sold my soul or nothing like that, you understand. Naw, I wouldn't have truck with the devil about nothing like that. I got my furniture and pays my ten dollars the first of the month just like clockwork.

BONO How long you say you been paying this ten dollars a month?

TROY Fifteen years!

BONO Hell, ain't you finished paying for it yet? How much the man done charged you?

TROY Ah hell, I done paid for it. I done paid for it ten times over! The fact is I'm scared to stop paying it.

ROSE Troy lying. We got that furniture from Mr. Glickman. He ain't paying no ten dollars a month to nobody.

TROY Aw hell, woman. Bono know I ain't that big a fool.

LYONS I was just getting ready to say . . . I know where there's a bridge for sale.

TROY Look here, I'll tell you this . . . it don't matter to me if he was the devil. It don't matter if the devil give credit. Somebody has got to give it.

ROSE It ought to matter. You going around talking about having truck with the devil . . . God's the one you gonna have to answer to. He's the one gonna be at the Judgment.

LYONS Yeah, well, look here, Pop . . . let me have that ten dollars. I'll give it back to you. Bonnie got a job working at the hospital.

TROY What I tell you, Bono? The only time I see this nigger is when he wants something. That's the only time I see him.

LYONS Come on, Pop, Mr. Bono don't want to hear all that. Let me have the ten dollars. I told you Bonnie working.

TROY What that mean to me? "Bonnie working." I don't care if she working. Go ask her for the ten dollars if she working. Talking about "Bonnie working." Why ain't you working?

LYONS Aw, Pop, you know I can't find no decent job. Where am I gonna get a job at? You know I can't get no job.

TROY I told you I know some people down there. I can get you on the rubbish if you want to work. I told you that the last time you came by here asking me for something.

LYONS Naw, Pop . . . thanks. That ain't for me. I don't wanna be carrying nobody's rubbish. I don't wanna be punching nobody's time clock.

TROY What's the matter, you too good to carry people's rubbish? Where you think that ten dollars you talking about come from? I'm just supposed to haul people's rubbish and give my money to you cause you too lazy to work. You too lazy to work and wanna know why you ain't got what I got.

ROSE What hospital Bonnie working at? Mercy?

LYONS She's down at Passavant working in the laundry.

TROY I ain't got nothing as it is. I give you that ten dollars and I got to eat beans the rest of the week. Naw . . . you ain't getting no ten dollars here.

LYONS You ain't got to be eating no beans. I don't know why you wanna say that.

TROY I ain't got no extra money. Gabe done moved over to Miss Pearl's paying her the rent and things done got tight around here. I can't afford to be giving you every payday.

LYONS I ain't asked you to give me nothing. I asked you to loan me ten dollars. I know you got ten dollars.

TROY Yeah, I got it. You know why I got it? Cause I don't throw my money away out there in the streets. You living the fast life . . . wanna be a musician . . . running around in them clubs and things . . . then, you learn to take care of yourself. You ain't gonna find me

Courtesy of and copyright The Gordon Parks Foundation

Gordon Parks took this photograph in 1956 as part of his Segregation Series, which was published in *Life* magazine. The series focused on an African American family living in Mobile, Alabama, documenting everyday life in the Jim Crow–era south. **How does this photograph illustrate some of the challenges and tensions Troy, Rose, and their family face? How does it contribute to your understanding of Troy's character in particular?**

going and asking nobody for nothing. I done spent too many years without.

LYONS You and me is two different people, Pop.

TROY I done learned my mistake and learned to do what's right by it. You still trying to get something for nothing. Life don't owe you nothing. You owe it to yourself. Ask Bono. He'll tell you I'm right.

LYONS You got your way of dealing with the world . . . I got mine. The only thing that matters to me is the music.

TROY Yeah, I can see that! It don't matter how you gonna eat . . . where your next dollar is coming from. You telling the truth there.

LYONS I know I got to eat. But I got to live too. I need something that gonna help me to get out of the bed in the morning. Make me feel like I belong in the world. I don't bother nobody. I just stay with the music cause that's the only way I can find to live in the world. Otherwise there ain't no telling what I might do. Now I don't come criticizing you and how you live. I just come by to ask you for ten dollars. I don't wanna hear all that about how I live.

TROY Boy, your mamma did a hell of a job raising you.

LYONS You can't change me, Pop. I'm thirty-four years old. If you wanted to change me, you should have been there when I was growing up. I come by to see you . . . ask for ten dollars and you want to talk about how I was raised. You don't know nothing about how I was raised.

ROSE Let the boy have ten dollars, Troy.

TROY (*to* **LYONS**): What the hell you looking at me for? I ain't got no ten dollars. You know what I do with my money. (*To* **ROSE**.) Give him ten dollars if you want him to have it.

ROSE I will. Just as soon as you turn it loose.

TROY (*handing* **ROSE** *the money*): There it is. Seventy-six dollars and forty-two cents. You see this, Bono? Now, I ain't gonna get but six of that back.

ROSE You ought to stop telling that lie. Here, Lyons. (*She hands him the money.*)

LYONS Thanks, Rose. Look . . . I got to run . . . I'll see you later.

TROY Wait a minute. You gonna say, "thanks, Rose" and ain't gonna look to see where she got that ten dollars from? See how they do me, Bono?

LYONS I know she got it from you, Pop. Thanks. I'll give it back to you.

TROY There he go telling another lie. Time I see that ten dollars . . . he'll be owing me thirty more.

LYONS See you, Mr. Bono.

BONO Take care, Lyons!

LYONS Thanks, Pop. I'll see you again.

LYONS *exits the yard.*

TROY I don't know why he don't go and get him a decent job and take care of that woman he got.

BONO He'll be all right, Troy. The boy is still young.

TROY The *boy* is thirty-four years old.

ROSE Let's not get off into all that.

BONO Look here . . . I got to be going. I got to be getting on. Lucille gonna be waiting.

TROY (*puts his arm around* **ROSE**): See this woman, Bono? I love this woman. I love this woman so much it hurts. I love her so much . . . I done run out of ways of loving her. So I got to go back to basics. Don't you come by my house Monday morning talking about time to go to work . . . 'cause I'm still gonna be stroking!

ROSE Troy! Stop it now!

BONO I ain't paying him no mind, Rose. That ain't nothing but gin-talk. Go on, Troy. I'll see you Monday.

TROY Don't you come by my house, nigger! I done told you what I'm gonna be doing.

The lights go down to black.

Scene 2

The lights come up on **ROSE** *hanging up clothes. She hums and sings softly to herself. It is the following morning.*

ROSE (*sings*): Jesus, be a fence all around me every day
Jesus, I want you to protect me as I travel on my way.
Jesus, be a fence all around me every day.

TROY *enters from the house.*

Jesus, I want you to protect me
As I travel on my way.
(*To* **TROY**.) 'Morning. You ready for breakfast? I can fix it soon as I finish hanging up these clothes?

TROY I got the coffee on. That'll be all right. I'll just drink some of that this morning.

ROSE That 651 hit yesterday. That's the second time this month. Miss Pearl hit for a dollar . . . seem like those that need the least always get lucky. Poor folks can't get nothing.

TROY Them numbers don't know nobody. I don't know why you fool with them. You and Lyons both.

ROSE It's something to do.

TROY You ain't doing nothing but throwing your money away.

ROSE Troy, you know I don't play foolishly. I just play a nickel here and a nickel there.

TROY That's two nickels you done thrown away.

ROSE Now I hit sometimes . . . that makes up for it. It always comes in handy when I do hit. I don't hear you complaining then.

TROY I ain't complaining now. I just say it's foolish. Trying to guess out of six hundred ways which way the number gonna come. If I had all the money niggers, these Negroes, throw away on numbers for one week — just one week — I'd be a rich man.

ROSE Well, you wishing and calling it foolish ain't gonna stop folks from playing numbers. That's one thing for sure. Besides . . . some good things come from playing numbers. Look where Pope done bought him that restaurant off of numbers.

TROY I can't stand niggers like that. Man ain't had two dimes to rub together. He walking around with his shoes all run over bumming money for cigarettes. All right. Got lucky there and hit the numbers . . .

ROSE Troy, I know all about it.

TROY Had good sense, I'll say that for him. He ain't throwed his money away. I seen niggers hit the numbers and go through two thousand dollars in four days. Man bought him that restaurant down there . . . fixed it up real nice . . . and then didn't want nobody to come in it! A Negro go in there and can't get no kind of service. I seen a white fellow come in there and order a bowl of stew. Pope picked all the meat out the pot for him. Man ain't had nothing but a bowl of meat! Negro come behind him and ain't got nothing but the potatoes and carrots. Talking about what numbers do for people, you picked a wrong example. Ain't done nothing but make a worser fool out of him than he was before.

ROSE Troy, you ought to stop worrying about what happened at work yesterday.

TROY I ain't worried. Just told me to be down there at the Commissioner's office on Friday. Everybody think they gonna fire me. I ain't worried about them firing me. You ain't got to worry about that. (*Pause.*) Where's Cory? Cory in the house? (*Calls.*) Cory?

ROSE He gone out.

TROY Out, huh? He gone out 'cause he know I want him to help me with this fence. I know how he is. That boy scared of work.

GABRIEL *enters. He comes halfway down the alley and, hearing* **TROY***'s voice, stops.*

TROY (*continues*): He ain't done a lick of work in his life.

ROSE He had to go to football practice. Coach wanted them to get in a little extra practice before the season start.

TROY I got his practice . . . running out of here before he get his chores done.

ROSE Troy, what is wrong with you this morning? Don't nothing set right with you. Go on back in there and go to bed . . . get up on the other side.

TROY Why something got to be wrong with me? I ain't said nothing wrong with me.

ROSE You got something to say about everything. First it's the numbers . . . then it's the way the man runs his restaurant . . . then you done got on Cory. What's it gonna be next? Take a look up there and see if the weather suits you . . . or is it gonna be how you gonna put up the fence with the clothes hanging in the yard.

TROY You hit the nail on the head then.

ROSE I know you like I know the back of my hand. Go on in there and get you some coffee . . . see if that straighten you up. 'Cause you ain't right this morning.

TROY *starts into the house and sees* **GABRIEL**.

GABRIEL *starts singing.* **TROY***'s brother, he is seven years younger than* **TROY**. *Injured in World War II, he has a metal plate in his head. He carries an old trumpet tied around his waist and believes with every fiber of his being that he is the Archangel Gabriel. He carries a chipped basket with an assortment of discarded fruits and vegetables he has picked up in the strip district and which he attempts to sell.*

GABRIEL (*singing*): Yes, ma am, I got plums
You ask me how I sell them
Oh ten cents apiece
Three for a quarter
Come and buy now
'Cause I'm here today
And tomorrow I'll be gone

GABRIEL *enters.*

Hey, Rose!

ROSE How you doing, Gabe?

GABRIEL There's Troy . . . Hey, Troy!

TROY Hey, Gabe.

Exit into kitchen.

ROSE (*to* **GABRIEL**): What you got there?

GABRIEL You know what I got, Rose. I got fruits and vegetables.

ROSE (*looking in basket*): Where's all these plums you talking about?

GABRIEL I ain't got no plums today, Rose. I was just singing that. Have some tomorrow. Put me in a big order for plums. Have enough plums tomorrow for St. Peter and everybody.

TROY *reenters from kitchen, crosses to steps.* (*to* **ROSE**.) Troy's mad at me.

TROY I ain't mad at you. What I got to be mad at you about? You ain't done nothing to me.

GABRIEL I just moved over to Miss Pearl's to keep out from in your way. I ain't mean no harm by it.

TROY Who said anything about that? I ain't said anything about that.

GABRIEL You ain't mad at me, is you?

TROY Naw . . . I ain't mad at you, Gabe. If I was mad at you I'd tell you about it.

GABRIEL Got me two rooms. In the basement. Got my own door too. Wanna see my key? (*He holds up a key.*) That's my own key! Ain't nobody else got a key like that. That's my key! My two rooms!

TROY Well, that's good, Gabe. You got your own key . . . that's good.

ROSE You hungry, Gabe? I was just fixing to cook Troy his breakfast.

GABRIEL I'll take some biscuits. You got some biscuits? Did you know when I was in heaven . . . every morning me and St. Peter would sit down by the gate and eat some big fat biscuits? Oh, yeah! We had us a good time. We'd sit there and eat us them biscuits and then St. Peter would go off to sleep and tell me to wake him up when it's time to open the gates for the judgment.

ROSE Well, come on . . . I'll make up a batch of biscuits.

ROSE *exits into the house.*

GABRIEL Troy . . . St. Peter got your name in the book. I seen it. It say . . . Troy Maxson. I say . . . I know him! He got the same name like what I got. That's my brother!

TROY How many times you gonna tell me that, Gabe?

GABRIEL Ain't got my name in the book. Don't have to have my name. I done died and went to heaven. He got your name though. One morning St. Peter was looking at his book . . . marking it up for the judgment . . . and he let me see your name. Got it in there under M. Got Rose's name . . . I ain't seen it like I seen yours . . . but I know it's in there. He got a great big book. Got everybody's name what was ever been born. That's what he told me. But I seen your name. Seen it with my own eyes.

TROY Go on in the house there. Rose going to fix you something to eat.

GABRIEL Oh, I ain't hungry. I done had breakfast with Aunt Jemimah. She come by and cooked me up a whole mess of flapjacks. Remember how we used to eat them flapjacks?

TROY Go on in the house and get you something to eat now.

GABRIEL I got to sell my plums. I done sold some tomatoes. Got me two quarters. Wanna see? (*He shows* **TROY** *his quarters.*) I'm gonna save them and buy me a new horn so St. Peter can hear me when it's time to open the gates. (**GABRIEL** *stops suddenly. Listens.*) Hear that? That's the hellhounds. I got to chase them out of here. Go on get out of here! Get out!

GABRIEL *exits singing.*

Better get ready for the judgment
Better get ready for the judgment
My Lord is coming down

ROSE *enters from the house.*

TROY He's gone off somewhere.

GABRIEL (*offstage*): Better get ready for the judgment
Better get ready for the judgment morning
Better get ready for the judgment
My God is coming down

ROSE He ain't eating right. Miss Pearl say she can't get him to eat nothing.

TROY What you want me to do about it, Rose? I done did everything I can for the man. I can't make him get well. Man got half his head blown away . . . what you expect?

ROSE Seem like something ought to be done to help him.

TROY Man don't bother nobody. He just mixed up from that metal plate he got in his head. Ain't no sense for him to go back into the hospital.

ROSE Least he be eating right. They can help him take care of himself.

TROY Don't nobody wanna be locked up, Rose. What you wanna lock him up for? Man go over there and fight the war . . . messin' around with them Japs, get half his head blown off . . . and they give him a lousy three thousand dollars. And I had to swoop down on that.

ROSE Is you fixing to go into that again?

TROY That's the only way I got a roof over my head . . . cause of that metal plate.

ROSE Ain't no sense you blaming yourself for nothing. Gabe wasn't in no condition to manage that money. You done what was right by him. Can't nobody say you ain't done what was right by him. Look how long

you took care of him . . . till he wanted to have his own place and moved over there with Miss Pearl.

TROY That ain't what I'm saying, woman! I'm just stating the facts. If my brother didn't have that metal plate in his head . . . I wouldn't have a pot to piss in or a window to throw it out of. And I'm fifty-three years old. Now see if you can understand that!

TROY *gets up from the porch and starts to exit the yard.*

ROSE Where you going off to? You been running out of here every Saturday for weeks. I thought you was gonna work on this fence?

TROY I'm gonna walk down to Taylors'. Listen to the ball game. I'll be back in a bit. I'll work on it when I get back.

He exits the yard. The lights go to black.

Scene 3

The lights come up on the yard. It is four hours later. **ROSE** *is taking down the clothes from the line.* **CORY** *enters carrying his football equipment.*

ROSE Your daddy like to had a fit with you running out of here this morning without doing your chores.

CORY I told you I had to go to practice.

ROSE He say you were supposed to help him with this fence.

CORY He been saying that the last four or five Saturdays, and then he don't never do nothing, but go down to Taylors. Did you tell him about the recruiter?

ROSE Yeah, I told him.

CORY What he say?

ROSE He ain't said nothing too much. You get in there and get started on your chores before he gets back. Go on and scrub down them steps before he gets back here hollering and carrying on.

CORY I'm hungry. What you got to eat, Mama?

ROSE Go on and get started on your chores. I got some meat loaf in there. Go on and make you a sandwich . . . and don't leave no mess in there.

CORY *exits into the house.* **ROSE** *continues to take down the clothes.* **TROY** *enters the yard and sneaks up and grabs her from behind.*

Troy! Go on, now. You liked to scared me to death. What was the score of the game? Lucille had me on the phone and I couldn't keep up with it.

TROY What I care about the game? Come here, woman. (*He tries to kiss her.*)

ROSE I thought you went down Taylors' to listen to the game. Go on, Troy! You supposed to be putting up this fence.

TROY (*attempting to kiss her again*): I'll put it up when I finish with what is at hand.

ROSE Go on, Troy. I ain't studying you.

TROY (*chasing after her*): I'm studying you . . . fixing to do my homework!

ROSE Troy, you better leave me alone.

TROY Where's Cory? That boy brought his butt home yet?

ROSE He's in the house doing his chores.

TROY (*calling*): Cory! Get your butt out here, boy!

ROSE *exits into the house with the laundry.* **TROY** *goes over to the pile of wood, picks up a board, and starts sawing.* **CORY** *enters from the house.*

TROY You just now coming in here from leaving this morning?

CORY Yeah, I had to go to football practice.

TROY Yeah, what?

CORY Yessir.

TROY I ain't but two seconds off you noway. The garbage sitting in there overflowing . . . you ain't done none of your chores . . . and you come in here talking about "Yeah."

CORY I was just getting ready to do my chores now, Pop . . .

TROY Your first chore is to help me with this fence on Saturday. Everything else come after that. Now get that saw and cut them boards.

CORY *takes the saw and begins cutting the boards.*

TROY *continues working. There is a long pause.*

CORY Hey, Pop . . . why don't you buy a TV?

TROY What I want with a TV? What I want one of them for?

CORY Everybody got one. Earl, Ba Bra . . . Jesse!

TROY I ain't asked you who had one. I say what I want with one?

CORY So you can watch it. They got lots of things on TV. Baseball games and everything. We could watch the World Series.

TROY Yeah . . . and how much this TV cost?

CORY I don't know. They got them on sale for around two hundred dollars.

TROY Two hundred dollars, huh?

CORY That ain't that much, Pop.

TROY Naw, it's just two hundred dollars. See that roof you got over your head at night? Let me tell you something about that roof. It's been over ten years since that roof was last tarred. See now . . . the snow come this winter and sit up there on that roof like it is . . . and it's gonna seep inside. It's just gonna be a little bit . . . ain't gonna hardly notice it. Then the next thing you know, it's gonna be leaking all over the house. Then the wood rot from all that water and you gonna need a whole new roof. Now, how much you think it cost to get that roof tarred?

CORY I don't know.

TROY Two hundred and sixty-four dollars . . . cash money. While you thinking about a TV, I got to be thinking about the roof . . . and whatever else go wrong here. Now if you had two hundred dollars, what would you do . . . fix the roof or buy a TV?

CORY I'd buy a TV. Then when the roof started to leak . . . when it needed fixing . . . I'd fix it.

TROY Where you gonna get the money from? You done spent it for a TV. You gonna sit up and watch the water run all over your brand new TV.

CORY Aw, Pop. You got money. I know you do.

TROY Where I got it at, huh?

CORY You got it in the bank.

TROY You wanna see my bankbook? You wanna see that seventy-three dollars and twenty-two cents I got sitting up in there.

CORY You ain't got to pay for it all at one time. You can put a down payment on it and carry it on home with you.

TROY Not me. I ain't gonna owe nobody nothing if I can help it. Miss a payment and they come and snatch it right out your house. Then what you got? Now, soon as I get two hundred dollars clear, then I'll buy a TV. Right now, as soon as I get two hundred and sixty-four dollars, I'm gonna have this roof tarred.

CORY Aw . . . Pop!

TROY You go on and get you two hundred dollars and buy one if ya want it. I got better things to do with my money.

CORY I can't get no two hundred dollars. I ain't never seen two hundred dollars.

TROY I'll tell you what . . . you get you a hundred dollars and I'll put the other hundred with it.

CORY All right, I'm gonna show you.

TROY You gonna show me how you can cut them boards right now.

CORY *begins to cut the boards. There is a long pause.*

CORY The Pirates won today. That makes five in a row.

TROY I ain't thinking about the Pirates. Got an all-white team. Got that boy . . . that Puerto Rican boy . . . Clemente. Don't even half-play him. That boy could be something if they give him a chance. Play him one day and sit him on the bench the next.

CORY He gets a lot of chances to play.

TROY I'm talking about playing regular. Playing every day so you can get your timing. That's what I'm talking about.

CORY They got some white guys on the team that don't play every day. You can't play everybody at the same time.

TROY If they got a white fellow sitting on the bench . . . you can bet your last dollar he can't play! The colored guy got to be twice as

good before he get on the team. That's why I don't want you to get all tied up in them sports. Man on the team and what it get him? They got colored on the team and don't use them. Same as not having them. All them teams the same.

CORY The Braves got Hank Aaron and Wes Covington. Hank Aaron hit two home runs today. That makes forty-three.

TROY Hank Aaron ain't nobody. That what you supposed to do. That's how you supposed to play the game. Ain't nothing to it. It's just a matter of timing . . . getting the right follow-through. Hell, I can hit forty-three home runs right now!

CORY Not off no major-league pitching, you couldn't.

TROY We had better pitching in the Negro leagues. I hit seven home runs off of Satchel Paige. You can't get no better than that!

CORY Sandy Koufax. He's leading the league in strikeouts.

TROY I ain't thinking of no Sandy Koufax.

CORY You got Warren Spahn and Lew Burdette. I bet you couldn't hit no home runs off of Warren Spahn.

TROY I'm through with it now. You go on and cut them boards. (*Pause.*) Your mama tell me you done got recruited by a college football team? Is that right?

CORY Yeah. Coach Zellman say the recruiter gonna be coming by to talk to you. Get you to sign the permission papers.

TROY I thought you supposed to be working down there at the A&P. Ain't you suppose to be working down there after school?

CORY Mr. Stawicki say he gonna hold my job for me until after the football season. Say starting next week I can work weekends.

TROY I thought we had an understanding about this football stuff? You suppose to keep up with your chores and hold that job down at the A&P. Ain't been around here all day on a Saturday. Ain't none of your chores done . . . and now you telling me you done quit your job.

CORY I'm going to be working weekends.

TROY You damn right you are! And ain't no need for nobody coming around here to talk to me about signing nothing.

CORY Hey, Pop . . . you can't do that. He's coming all the way from North Carolina.

TROY I don't care where he coming from. The white man ain't gonna let you get nowhere with that football noway. You go on and get your book-learning so you can work yourself up in that A&P or learn how to fix cars or build houses or something, get you a trade. That way you have something can't nobody take away from you. You go on and learn how to put your hands to some good use. Besides hauling people's garbage.

CORY I get good grades, Pop. That's why the recruiter wants to talk with you. You got to keep up your grades to get recruited. This way I'll be going to college. I'll get a chance . . .

TROY First you gonna get your butt down there to the A&P and get your job back.

CORY Mr. Stawicki done already hired somebody else 'cause I told him I was playing football.

TROY You a bigger fool than I thought . . . to let somebody take away your job so you can play some football. Where you gonna get your money to take out your girlfriend and what-not? What kind of foolishness is that to let somebody take away your job?

CORY I'm still gonna be working weekends.

TROY Naw . . . naw. You getting your butt out of here and finding you another job.

CORY Come on, Pop! I got to practice. I can't work after school and play football too. The team needs me. That's what Coach Zellman say . . .

TROY I don't care what nobody else say. I'm the boss . . . you understand? I'm the boss around here. I do the only saying what counts.

CORY Come on, Pop!

TROY I asked you . . . did you understand?

CORY Yeah . . .

TROY What?!

CORY Yessir.

TROY You go on down there to that A&P and see if you can get your job back. If you can't do both . . . then you quit the football team. You've got to take the crookeds with the straights.

CORY Yessir. (*Pause.*) Can I ask you a question?

TROY What the hell you wanna ask me? Mr. Stawicki the one you got the questions for.

CORY How come you ain't never liked me?

TROY Liked you? Who the hell say I got to like you? What law is there say I got to like you? Wanna stand up in my face and ask a damn fool-ass question like that. Talking about liking somebody. Come here, boy, when I talk to you.

CORY *comes over to where* **TROY** *is working. He stands slouched over and* **TROY** *shoves him on his shoulder.*

Straighten up, goddammit! I asked you a question . . . what law is there say I got to like you?

CORY None.

TROY Well, all right then! Don't you eat every day? (*Pause.*) Answer me when I talk to you! Don't you eat every day?

CORY Yeah.

TROY Nigger, as long as you in my house, you put that sir on the end of it when you talk to me!

CORY Yes . . . sir.

TROY You eat every day.

CORY Yessir!

TROY Got a roof over your head.

CORY Yessir!

TROY Got clothes on your back.

CORY Yessir.

TROY Why you think that is?

CORY Cause of you.

TROY Ah, hell I know it's cause of me . . . but why do you think that is?

CORY (*hesitant*): Cause you like me.

TROY Like you? I go out of here every morning . . . bust my butt . . . putting up with them crackers every day . . . cause I like you? You are the biggest fool I ever saw. (*Pause.*) It's my job. It's my responsibility! You understand that? A man got to take care of his family. You live in my house . . . sleep you behind on my bedclothes . . . fill you belly up with my food . . . cause you my son. You my flesh and blood. Not cause I like you! Cause it's my duty to take care of you. I owe a responsibility to you! Let's get this straight right here . . . before it go along any further . . . I ain't got to like you. Mr. Rand don't give me my money come payday cause he likes me. He give me cause he owe me. I done give you everything I had to give you. I gave you your life! Me and your mama worked that out between us. And liking your black ass wasn't part of the bargain. Don't you try and go through life worrying about if somebody like you or not. You best be making sure they doing right by you. You understand what I'm saying, boy?

CORY Yessir.

TROY Then get the hell out of my face, and get on down to that A&P.

ROSE *has been standing behind the screen door for much of the scene. She enters as* **CORY** *exits.*

ROSE Why don't you let the boy go ahead and play football, Troy? Ain't no harm in that. He's just trying to be like you with the sports.

TROY I don't want him to be like me! I want him to move as far away from my life as he can get. You the only decent thing that ever happened to me. I wish him that. But I don't wish him a thing else from my life. I decided seventeen years ago that boy wasn't getting involved in no sports. Not after what they did to me in the sports.

ROSE Troy, why don't you admit you was too old to play in the major leagues? For once . . . why don't you admit that?

TROY What do you mean too old? Don't come telling me I was too old. I just wasn't the right color. Hell, I'm fifty-three years old and can do better than Selkirk's .269 right now!

ROSE How's was you gonna play ball when you were over forty? Sometimes I can't get no sense out of you.

TROY I got good sense, woman. I got sense enough not to let my boy get hurt over playing no sports. You been mothering that boy too much. Worried about if people like him.

ROSE Everything that boy do . . . he do for you. He wants you to say "Good job, son." That's all.

TROY Rose, I ain't got time for that. He's alive. He's healthy. He's got to make his own way. I made mine. Ain't nobody gonna hold his hand when he get out there in that world.

ROSE Times have changed from when you was young, Troy. People change. The world's changing around you and you can't even see it.

TROY (*slow, methodical*): Woman . . . I do the best I can do. I come in here every Friday. I carry a sack of potatoes and a bucket of lard. You all line up at the door with your hands out. I give you the lint from my pockets. I give you my sweat and my blood. I ain't got no tears. I done spent them. We go upstairs in that room at night . . . and I fall down on you and try to blast a hole into forever. I get up Monday morning . . . find my lunch on the table. I go out. Make my way. Find my strength to carry me through to the next Friday. (*Pause.*) That's all I got, Rose. That's all I got to give. I can't give nothing else.

TROY *exits into the house. The lights go down to black.*

Scene 4

It is Friday. Two weeks later. **CORY** *starts out of the house with his football equipment. The phone rings.*

CORY (*calling*): I got it! (*He answers the phone and stands in the screen door talking.*) Hello? Hey, Jesse. Naw . . . I was just getting ready to leave now.

ROSE (*calling*): Cory!

CORY I told you, man, them spikes is all tore up. You can use them if you want, but they ain't no good. Earl got some spikes.

ROSE (*calling*): Cory!

CORY (*calling to* **ROSE**): Mam? I'm talking to Jesse. (*Into phone.*) When she say that? (*Pause.*) Aw, you lying, man. I'm gonna tell her you said that.

ROSE (*calling*): Cory, don't you go nowhere!

CORY I got to go to the game, Ma! (*Into the phone.*) Yeah, hey, look, I'll talk to you later. Yeah, I'll meet you over Earl's house. Later. Bye, Ma.

CORY *exits the house and starts out the yard.*

ROSE Cory, where you going off to? You got that stuff all pulled out and thrown all over your room.

CORY (*in the yard*): I was looking for my spikes. Jesse wanted to borrow my spikes.

ROSE Get up there and get that cleaned up before your daddy get back in here.

CORY I got to go to the game! I'll clean it up *when I get back.*

CORY *exits.*

ROSE That's all he need to do is see that room all messed up.

ROSE *exits into the house.* **TROY** *and* **BONO** *enter the yard.* **TROY** *is dressed in clothes other than his work clothes.*

BONO He told him the same thing he told you. Take it to the union.

TROY Brownie ain't got that much sense. Man wasn't thinking about nothing. He wait until I confront them on it . . . then he wanna come crying seniority. (*Calls.*) Hey, Rose!

BONO I wish I could have seen Mr. Rand's face when he told you.

TROY He couldn't get it out of his mouth! Liked to bit his tongue! When they called me down there to the Commissioner's office . . . he thought they was gonna fire me. Like everybody else.

BONO I didn't think they was gonna fire you. I thought they was gonna put you on the warning paper.

TROY Hey, Rose! (*To* **BONO**.) Yeah, Mr. Rand like to bit his tongue.

TROY *breaks the seal on the bottle, takes a drink, and hands it to* **BONO**.

BONO I see you run right down to Taylors' and told that Alberta gal.

TROY (*calling*): Hey Rose! (*To* **BONO**.) I told everybody. Hey, Rose! I went down there to cash my check.

ROSE (*entering from the house*): Hush all that hollering, man! I know you out here. What they say down there at the Commissioner's office?

TROY You supposed to come when I call you, woman. Bono'll tell you that. (*To* **BONO**.) Don't Lucille come when you call her?

ROSE Man, hush your mouth. I ain't no dog . . . talk about "come when you call me."

TROY (*puts his arm around* **ROSE**): You hear this, Bono? I had me an old dog used to get uppity like that. You say, "C'mere, Blue!" . . . and he just lay there and look at you. End up getting a stick and chasing him away trying to make him come.

ROSE I ain't studying you and your dog. I remember you used to sing that old song.

TROY (*he sings*): Hear it ring! Hear it ring! I had a dog his name was Blue.

ROSE Don't nobody wanna hear you sing that old song.

TROY (*sings*): You know Blue was mighty true.

ROSE Used to have Cory running around here singing that song.

BONO Hell, I remember that song myself.

TROY (*sings*): You know Blue was a good old dog. Blue treed a possum in a hollow log. That was my daddy's song. My daddy made up that song.

ROSE I don't care who made it up. Don't nobody wanna hear you sing it.

TROY (*makes a song like calling a dog*): Come here, woman.

ROSE You come in here carrying on, I reckon they ain't fired you. What they say down there at the Commissioner's office?

TROY Look here, Rose . . . Mr. Rand called me into his office today when I got back from talking to them people down there . . . it come from up top . . . he called me in and told me they was making me a driver.

ROSE Troy, you kidding!

TROY No I ain't. Ask Bono.

ROSE Well, that's great, Troy. Now you don't have to hassle them people no more.

LYONS *enters from the street.*

TROY Aw hell, I wasn't looking to see you today. I thought you was in jail. Got it all over the front page of the *Courier* about them raiding Sefus's place . . . where you be hanging out with all them thugs.

LYONS Hey, Pop . . . that ain't got nothing to do with me. I don't go down there gambling. I go down there to sit in with the band. I ain't got nothing to do with the gambling part. They got some good music down there.

TROY They got some rogues . . . is what they got.

LYONS How you been, Mr. Bono? Hi, Rose.

BONO I see where you playing down at the Crawford Grill tonight.

ROSE How come you ain't brought Bonnie like I told you? You should have brought Bonnie with you, she ain't been over in a month of Sundays.

LYONS I was just in the neighborhood . . . thought I'd stop by.

TROY Here he come . . .

BONO Your daddy got a promotion on the rubbish. He's gonna be the first colored driver. Ain't got to do nothing but sit up there and read the paper like them white fellows.

LYONS Hey, Pop . . . if you knew how to read you'd be all right.

BONO Naw . . . naw . . . you mean if the nigger knew how to *drive* he'd be all right. Been

fighting with them people about driving and ain't even got a license. Mr. Rand know you ain't got no driver's license?

TROY Driving ain't nothing. All you do is point the truck where you want it to go. Driving ain't nothing.

BONO Do Mr. Rand know you ain't got no driver's license? That's what I'm talking about. I ain't asked if driving was easy. I asked if Mr. Rand know you ain't got no driver's license.

TROY He ain't got to know. The man ain't got to know my business. Time he find out, I have two or three driver's licenses.

LYONS (*going into his pocket*): Say, look here, Pop . . .

TROY I knew it was coming. Didn't I tell you, Bono? I know what kind of "Look here, Pop" that was. The nigger fixing to ask me for some money. It's Friday night. It's my payday. All them rogues down there on the avenue . . . the ones that ain't in jail . . . and Lyons is hopping in his shoes to get down there with them.

LYONS See, Pop . . . if you give somebody else a chance to talk sometimes, you'd see that I was fixing to pay you back your ten dollars like I told you. Here . . . I told you I'd pay you when Bonnie got paid.

TROY Naw . . . you go ahead and keep that ten dollars. Put it in the bank. The next time you feel like you wanna come by here and ask me for something . . . you go on down there and get that.

LYONS Here's your ten dollars, Pop. I told you I don't want you to give me nothing. I just wanted to borrow ten dollars.

TROY Naw . . . you go on and keep that for the next time you want to ask me.

LYONS Come on, Pop . . . here go your ten dollars.

ROSE Why don't you go on and let the boy pay you back, Troy?

LYONS Here you go, Rose. If you don't take it I'm gonna have to hear about it for the next six months. (*He hands her the money.*)

ROSE You can hand yours over here too, Troy.

TROY You see this, Bono. You see how they do me.

BONO Yeah, Lucille do me the same way.

GABRIEL *is heard singing offstage. He enters.*

GABRIEL Better get ready for the Judgment! Better get ready for . . . Hey! . . . Hey! . . . There's Troy's boy!

LYONS How are you doing, Uncle Gabe?

GABRIEL Lyons . . . The King of the Jungle! Rose . . . hey, Rose. Got a flower for you. (*He takes a rose from his pocket.*) Picked it myself. That's the same rose like you is!

ROSE That's right nice of you, Gabe.

LYONS What you been doing, Uncle Gabe?

GABRIEL Oh, I been chasing hellhounds and waiting on the time to tell St. Peter to open the gates.

LYONS You been chasing hellhounds, huh? Well . . . you doing the right thing, Uncle Gabe. Somebody got to chase them.

GABRIEL Oh, yeah . . . I know it. The devil's strong. The devil ain't no pushover. Hellhounds snipping at everybody's heels. But I got my trumpet waiting on the Judgment time.

LYONS Waiting on the Battle of Armageddon, huh?

GABRIEL Ain't gonna be too much of a battle when God get to waving that Judgment sword. But the people's gonna have a hell of a time trying to get into heaven if them gates ain't open.

LYONS (*putting his arm around* **GABRIEL**): You hear this, Pop. Uncle Gabe, you all right!

GABRIEL (*laughing with* **LYONS**): Lyons! King of the Jungle.

ROSE You gonna stay for supper, Gabe? Want me to fix you a plate?

GABRIEL I'll take a sandwich, Rose. Don't want no plate. Just wanna eat with my hands. I'll take a sandwich.

ROSE How about you, Lyons? You staying? Got some short ribs cooking.

LYONS Naw, I won't eat nothing till after we finished playing. (*Pause.*) You ought to come down and listen to me play Pop.

TROY I don't like that Chinese music. All that noise.

ROSE Go on in the house and wash up, Gabe . . . I'll fix you a sandwich.

GABRIEL (*to* **LYONS**, *as he exits*): Troy's mad at me.

LYONS What you mad at Uncle Gabe for, Pop?

ROSE He thinks Troy's mad at him cause he moved over to Miss Pearl's.

TROY I ain't mad at the man. He can live where he want to live at.

LYONS What he move over there for? Miss Pearl don't like nobody.

ROSE She don't mind him none. She treats him real nice. She just don't allow all that singing.

TROY She don't mind that rent he be paying . . . that's what she don't mind.

ROSE Troy, I ain't going through that with you no more. He's over there cause he want to have his own place. He can come and go as he please.

TROY Hell, he could come and go as he please here. I wasn't stopping him. I ain't put no rules on him.

ROSE It ain't the same thing, Troy. And you know it.

GABRIEL *comes to the door.*

Now, that's the last I wanna hear about that. I don't wanna hear nothing else about Gabe and Miss Pearl. And next week . . .

GABRIEL I'm ready for my sandwich, Rose.

ROSE And next week . . . when that recruiter come from that school . . . I want you to sign that paper and go on and let Cory play football. Then that'll be the last I have to hear about that.

TROY (*to* **ROSE** *as she exits into the house*): I ain't thinking about Cory nothing.

LYONS What . . . Cory got recruited? What school he going to?

TROY That boy walking around here smelling his piss . . . thinking he's grown. Thinking he's gonna do what he want, irrespective of what I say. Look here, Bono . . . I left the Commissioner's office and went down to the A&P . . . that boy ain't working down there. He lying to me. Telling me he got his job back . . . telling me he working weekends . . . telling me he working after school . . . Mr. Stawicki tell me he ain't working down there at all!

LYONS Cory just growing up. He's just busting at the seams trying to fill out your shoes.

TROY I don't care what he's doing. When he get to the point where he wanna disobey me . . . then it's time for him to move on. Bono'll tell you that. I bet he ain't never disobeyed his daddy without paying the consequences.

BONO I ain't never had a chance. My daddy came on through . . . but I ain't never knew him to see him . . . or what he had on his mind or where he went. Just moving on through. Searching out the New Land. That's what the old folks used to call it. See a fellow moving around from place to place . . . woman to woman . . . called it searching out the New Land. I can't say if he ever found it. I come along, didn't want no kids. Didn't know if I was gonna be in one place long enough to fix on them right as their daddy. I figured I was going searching too. As it turned out I been hooked up with Lucille near about as long as your daddy been with Rose. Going on sixteen years.

TROY Sometimes I wish I hadn't known my daddy. He ain't cared nothing about no kids. A kid to him wasn't nothing. All he wanted was for you to learn how to walk so he could start you to working. When it come time for eating . . . he ate first. If there was anything left over, that's what you got. Man would sit down and eat two chickens and give you the wing.

LYONS You ought to stop that, Pop. Everybody feed their kids. No matter how hard times is . . . everybody care about their kids. Make sure they have something to eat.

TROY The only thing my daddy cared about was getting them bales of cotton in to Mr. Lubin. That's the only thing that mattered to him. Sometimes I used to wonder why he was living. Wonder why the devil hadn't come and got him. "Get them bales of cotton in to Mr. Lubin" and find out he owe him money . . .

LYONS He should have just went on and left when he saw he couldn't get nowhere. That's what I would have done.

TROY How he gonna leave with eleven kids? And where he gonna go? He ain't knew how to do nothing but farm. No, he was trapped and I think he knew it. But I'll say this for him . . . he felt a responsibility toward us. Maybe he ain't treated us the way I felt he should have . . . but without that responsibility he could have walked off and left us . . . made his own way.

BONO A lot of them did. Back in those days what you talking about . . . they walk out their front door and just take on down one road or another and keep on walking.

LYONS There you go! That's what I'm talking about.

BONO Just keep on walking till you come to something else. Ain't you never heard of nobody having the walking blues? Well, that's what you call it when you just take off like that.

TROY My daddy ain't had them walking blues! What you talking about? He stayed right there with his family. But he was just as evil as he could be. My mama couldn't stand him. Couldn't stand that evilness. She run off when I was about eight. She sneaked off one night after he had gone to sleep. Told me she was coming back for me. I ain't never seen her no more. All his women run off and left him. He wasn't good for nobody.

When my turn come to head out, I was fourteen and got to sniffing around Joe Canewell's daughter. Had us an old mule we called Greyboy. My daddy sent me out to do some plowing and I tied up Greyboy and went to fooling around with Joe Canewell's daughter. We done found us a nice little spot, got real cozy with each other. She about thirteen and we done figured we was grown anyway . . . so we down there enjoying ourselves . . . ain't thinking about nothing. We didn't know Greyboy had got loose and wandered back to the house and my daddy was looking for me. We down there by the creek enjoying ourselves when my daddy come up on us. Surprised us. He had them leather straps off the mule and commenced to whupping me like there was no tomorrow. I jumped up, mad and embarrassed. I was scared of my daddy. When he commenced to whupping on me . . . quite naturally I run to get out of the way. (*Pause.*) Now I thought he was mad cause I ain't done my work. But I see where he was chasing me off so he could have the gal for himself. When I see what the matter of it was, I lost all fear of my daddy. Right there is where I become a man . . . at fourteen years of age. (*Pause.*) Now it was my turn to run him off. I picked up them same reins that he had used on me. I picked up them reins and commenced to whupping on him. The gal jumped up and run off . . . and when my daddy turned to face me, I could see why the devil had never come to get him . . . cause he was the devil himself. I don't know what happened. When I woke up, I was laying right there by the creek, and Blue . . . this old dog we had . . . was licking my face. I thought I was blind. I couldn't see nothing. Both my eyes were swollen shut. I laid there and cried. I didn't know what I was gonna do. The only thing I knew was the time had come for me to leave my daddy's house. And right there the world suddenly got big. And it was a long time before I could cut it down to where I could handle it.

Part of that cutting down was when I got to the place where I could feel him kicking in

This painting by Jacob Lawrence is from his Migration Series, which depicts the migration of African Americans from the rural south to northern urban centers over the course of several decades, beginning around 1915. **How might this work offer insight into the experience that shaped Troy's father?**

my blood and knew that the only thing that separated us was the matter of a few years.

GABRIEL *enters from the house with a sandwich.*

LYONS What you got there, Uncle Gabe?

GABRIEL Got me a ham sandwich. Rose gave me a ham sandwich.

TROY I don't know what happened to him. I done lost touch with everybody except Gabriel. But I hope he's dead. I hope he found some peace.

LYONS That's a heavy story, Pop. I didn't know you left home when you was fourteen.

TROY And didn't know nothing. The only part of the world I knew was the forty-two acres of Mr. Lubin's land. That's all I knew about life.

LYONS Fourteen's kinda young to be out on your own. (*Phone rings.*) I don't even think I was ready to be out on my own at fourteen. I don't know what I would have done.

TROY I got up from the creek and walked on down to Mobile. I was through with farming. Figured I could do better in the city. So I walked the two hundred miles to Mobile.

LYONS Wait a minute . . . you ain't walked no two hundred miles, Pop. Ain't nobody gonna walk no two hundred miles. You talking about some walking there.

BONO That's the only way you got anywhere back in them days.

LYONS Shhh. Damn if I wouldn't have hitched a ride with somebody!

TROY Who you gonna hitch it with? They ain't had no cars and things like they got now. We talking about 1918.

ROSE (*entering*): What you all out here getting into?

TROY (*to* **ROSE**): I'm telling Lyons how good he got it. He don't know nothing about this I'm talking.

ROSE Lyons, that was Bonnie on the phone. She say you supposed to pick her up.

LYONS Yeah, okay, Rose.

TROY I walked on down to Mobile and hitched up with some of them fellows that was heading this way. Got up here and found out . . . not only couldn't you get a job . . . you couldn't find no place to live. I thought I was in freedom. Shhh. Colored folks living down there on the riverbanks in whatever kind of shelter they could find for themselves. Right down there under the Brady Street Bridge. Living in shacks made of sticks and tarpaper. Messed around there and went from bad to worse. Started stealing. First it was food. Then I figured, hell, if I steal money I can buy me some food. Buy me some shoes too! One thing led to another. Met your mama. I was

young and anxious to be a man. Met your mama and had you. What I do that for? Now I got to worry about feeding you and her. Got to steal three times as much. Went out one day looking for somebody to rob . . . that's what I was, a robber. I'll tell you the truth. I'm ashamed of it today. But it's the truth. Went to rob this fellow . . . pulled out my knife . . . and he pulled out a gun. Shot me in the chest. I felt just like somebody had taken a hot branding iron and laid it on me. When he shot me I jumped at him with my knife. They told me I killed him and they put me in the penitentiary and locked me up for fifteen years. That's where I met Bono. That's where I learned how to play baseball. Got out that place and your mama had taken you and went on to make life without me. Fifteen years was a long time for her to wait. But that fifteen years cured me of that robbing stuff. Rose'll tell you. She asked me when I met her if I had gotten all that foolishness out of my system. And I told her, "Baby, it's you and baseball all what count with me." You hear me, Bono? I meant it too. She say, "Which one comes first?" I told her, "Baby, ain't no doubt it's baseball . . . but you stick and get old with me and we'll both outlive this baseball." Am I right, Rose? And it's true.

ROSE Man, hush your mouth. You ain't said no such thing. Talking about, "Baby, you know you'll always be number one with me." That's what you was talking.

TROY You hear that, Bono. That's why I love her.

BONO Rose'll keep you straight. You get off the track, she'll straighten you up.

ROSE Lyons, you better get on up and get Bonnie. She waiting on you.

LYONS (*gets up to go*): Hey, Pop, why don't you come on down to the Grill and hear me play?

TROY I ain't going down there. I'm too old to be sitting around in them clubs.

BONO You got to be good to play down at the Grill.

LYONS Come on, Pop . . .

TROY I got to get up in the morning.

LYONS You ain't got to stay long.

TROY Naw, I'm gonna get my supper and go on to bed.

LYONS Well, I got to go. I'll see you again.

TROY Don't you come around my house on my payday.

ROSE Pick up the phone and let somebody know you coming. And bring Bonnie with you. You know I'm always glad to see her.

LYONS Yeah, I'll do that, Rose. You take care now. See you, Pop. See you, Mr. Bono. See you, Uncle Gabe.

GABRIEL Lyons! King of the Jungle!

LYONS *exits.*

TROY Is supper ready, woman? Me and you got some business to take care of. I'm gonna tear it up too.

ROSE Troy, I done told you now!

TROY (*puts his arm around* **BONO**): Aw hell, woman . . . this is Bono. Bono like family. I done known this nigger since . . . how long I done know you?

BONO It's been a long time.

TROY I done know this nigger since Skippy was a pup. Me and him done been through some times.

BONO You sure right about that.

TROY Hell, I done know him longer than I known you. And we still standing shoulder to shoulder. Hey, look here, Bono . . . a man can't ask for no more than that. (*Drinks to him.*) I love you, nigger.

BONO Hell, I love you too . . . I got to get home see my woman. You got yours in hand. I got to go get mine.

BONO *starts to exit as* **CORY** *enters the yard, dressed in his football uniform. He gives* **TROY** *a hard, uncompromising look.*

CORY What you do that for, Pop?

He throws his helmet down in the direction of **TROY**.

ROSE What's the matter? Cory . . . what's the matter?

CORY Papa done went up to the school and told Coach Zellman I can't play football no more. Wouldn't even let me play the game. Told him to tell the recruiter not to come.

ROSE Troy . . .

TROY What you Troying me for. Yeah, I did it. And the boy know why I did it.

CORY Why you wanna do that to me? That was the one chance I had.

ROSE Ain't nothing wrong with Cory playing football, Troy.

TROY The boy lied to me. I told the nigger if he wanna play football . . . to keep up his chores and hold down that job at the A&P. That was the conditions. Stopped down there to see Mr. Stawicki . . .

CORY I can't work after school during the football season, Pop! I tried to tell you that Mr. Stawicki's holding my job for me. You don't never want to listen to nobody. And then you wanna go and do this to me!

TROY I ain't done nothing to you. You done it to yourself.

CORY Just cause you didn't have a chance! You just scared I'm gonna be better than you, that's all.

TROY Come here.

ROSE Troy . . .

CORY *reluctantly crosses over to* **TROY**.

TROY All right! See. You done made a mistake.

CORY I didn't even do nothing!

TROY I'm gonna tell you what your mistake was. See . . . you swung at the ball and didn't hit it. That's strike one. See, you in the batter's box now. You swung and you missed. That's strike one. Don't you strike out!

Lights fade to black.

ACT II

Scene 1

The following morning. **CORY** *is at the tree hitting the ball with the bat. He tries to mimic* **TROY**, *but his swing is awkward, less sure.* **ROSE** *enters from the house.*

ROSE Cory, I want you to help me with this cupboard.

CORY I ain't quitting the team. I don't care what Poppa say.

ROSE I'll talk to him when he gets back. He had to go see about your Uncle Gabe. The police done arrested him. Say he was disturbing the peace. He'll be back directly. Come on in here and help me clean out the top of this cupboard.

CORY *exits into the house.* **ROSE** *sees* **TROY** *and* **BONO** *coming down the alley.*

Troy . . . what they say down there?

TROY Ain't said nothing. I give them fifty dollars and they let him go. I'll talk to you about it. Where's Cory?

ROSE He's in there helping me clean out these cupboards.

TROY Tell him to get his butt out here.

TROY *and* **BONO** *go over to the pile of wood.* **BONO** *picks up the saw and begins sawing.*

TROY (*to* **BONO**): All they want is the money. That makes six or seven times I done went down there and got him. See me coming they stick out their hands.

BONO Yeah. I know what you mean. That's all they care about . . . that money. They don't care about what's right. (*Pause.*) Nigger, why you got to go and get some hard wood? You ain't doing nothing but building a little old fence. Get you some soft pine wood. That's all you need.

TROY I know what I'm doing. This is outside wood. You put pine wood inside the house. Pine wood is inside wood. This here is outside wood. Now you tell me where the fence is gonna be?

BONO You don't need this wood. You can put it up with pine wood and it'll stand as long as you gonna be here looking at it.

TROY How you know how long I'm gonna be here, nigger? Hell, I might just live forever. Live longer than old man Horsely.

BONO That's what Magee used to say.

TROY Magee's a damn fool. Now you tell me who you ever heard of gonna pull their own teeth with a pair of rusty pliers.

BONO The old folks . . . my granddaddy used to pull his teeth with pliers. They ain't had no dentists for the colored folks back then.

TROY Get clean pliers! You understand? Clean pliers! Sterilize them! Besides we ain't living back then. All Magee had to do was walk over to Doc Goldblum's.

BONO I see where you and that Tallahassee gal . . . that Alberta . . . I see where you all done got tight.

TROY What you mean "got tight"?

BONO I see where you be laughing and joking with her all the time.

TROY I laughs and jokes with all of them, Bono. You know me.

BONO That ain't the kind of laughing and joking I'm talking about.

CORY *enters from the house.*

CORY How you doing, Mr. Bono?

TROY Cory? Get that saw from Bono and cut some wood. He talking about the wood's too hard to cut. Stand back there, Jim, and let that young boy show you how it's done.

BONO He's sure welcome to it.

CORY *takes the saw and begins to cut the wood.*

Whew-e-e! Look at that. Big old strong boy. Look like Joe Louis. Hell, must be getting old the way I'm watching that boy whip through that wood.

CORY I don't see why Mama want a fence around the yard noways.

TROY Damn if I know either. What the hell she keeping out with it? She ain't got nothing nobody want.

BONO Some people build fences to keep people out . . . and other people build fences to keep people in. Rose wants to hold on to you all. She loves you.

TROY Hell, nigger, I don't need nobody to tell me my wife loves me. Cory . . . go on in the house and see if you can find that other saw.

CORY Where's it at?

TROY I said find it! Look for it till you find it!

CORY *exits into the house.*

What's that supposed to mean? Wanna keep us in?

BONO Troy . . . I done known you seem like damn near my whole life. You and Rose both. I done know both of you all for a long time. I remember when you met Rose. When you was hitting them baseball out the park. A lot of them old gals was after you then. You had the pick of the litter. When you picked Rose, I was happy for you. That was the first time I knew you had any sense. I said . . . My man Troy knows what he's doing . . . I'm gonna follow this nigger . . . he might take me somewhere. I been following you too. I done learned a whole heap of things about life watching you. I done learned how to tell where the shit lies. How to tell it from the alfalfa. You done learned me a lot of things. You showed me how to not make the same mistakes . . . to take life as it comes along and keep putting one foot in front of the other. (*Pause.*) Rose a good woman, Troy.

TROY Hell, nigger, I know she a good woman. I been married to her for eighteen years. What you got on your mind, Bono?

BONO I just say she a good woman. Just like I say anything. I ain't got to have nothing on my mind.

TROY You just gonna say she a good woman and leave it hanging out there like that? Why you telling me she a good woman?

BONO She loves you, Troy. Rose loves you.

TROY You saying I don't measure up. That's what you trying to say. I don't measure up cause I'm seeing this other gal. I know what you trying to say.

BONO I know what Rose means to you, Troy.

I'm just trying to say I don't want to see you mess up.

TROY Yeah, I appreciate that, Bono. If you was messing around on Lucille I'd be telling you the same thing.

BONO Well, that's all I got to say. I just say that because I love you both.

TROY Hell, you know me . . . I wasn't out there looking for nothing. You can't find a better woman than Rose. I know that. But seems like this woman just stuck onto me where I can't shake her loose. I done wrestled with it, tried to throw her off me . . . but she just stuck on tighter. Now she's stuck on for good.

BONO You's in control . . . that's what you tell me all the time. You responsible for what you do.

TROY I ain't ducking the responsibility of it. As long as it sets right in my heart . . . then I'm okay. Cause that's all I listen to. It'll tell me right from wrong every time. And I ain't talking about doing Rose no bad turn. I love Rose. She done carried me a long ways and I love and respect her for that.

BONO I know you do. That's why I don't want to see you hurt her. But what you gonna do when she find out? What you got then? If you try and juggle both of them . . . sooner or later you gonna drop one of them. That's common sense.

TROY Yeah, I hear what you saying, Bono. I been trying to figure a way to work it out.

BONO Work it out right, Troy. I don't want to be getting all up between you and Rose's business . . . but work it so it come out right.

TROY Ah hell, I get all up between you and Lucille's business. When you gonna get that woman that refrigerator she been wanting? Don't tell me you ain't got no money now. I know who your banker is. Mellon don't need that money bad as Lucille want that refrigerator. I'll tell you that.

BONO Tell you what I'll do . . . when you finish building this fence for Rose . . . I'll buy Lucille that refrigerator.

TROY You done stuck your foot in your mouth now!

TROY *grabs up a board and begins to saw.* **BONO** *starts to walk out the yard.*

Hey, nigger . . . where you going?

BONO I'm going home. I know you don't expect me to help you now. I'm protecting my money. I wanna see you put that fence up by yourself. That's what I want to see. You'll be here another six months without me.

TROY Nigger, you ain't right.

BONO When it comes to my money . . . I'm right as fireworks on the Fourth of July.

TROY All right, we gonna see now. You better get out your bankbook.

BONO *exits, and* **TROY** *continues to work.* **ROSE** *enters from the house.*

ROSE What they say down there? What's happening with Gabe?

TROY I went down there and got him out. Cost me fifty dollars. Say he was disturbing the peace. Judge set up a hearing for him in three weeks. Say to show cause why he shouldn't be recommitted.

ROSE What was he doing that cause them to arrest him?

TROY Some kids was teasing him and he run them off home. Say he was howling and carrying on. Some folks seen him and called the police. That's all it was.

ROSE Well, what's you say? What'd you tell the judge?

TROY Told him I'd look after him. It didn't make no sense to recommit the man. He stuck out his big greasy palm and told me to give him fifty dollars and take him on home.

ROSE Where's he at now? Where'd he go off to?

TROY He's gone about his business. He don't need nobody to hold his hand.

ROSE Well, I don't know. Seem like that would be the best place for him if they did put him into the hospital. I know what you're gonna say. But that's what I think would be best.

TROY The man done had his life ruined

fighting for what? And they wanna take and lock him up. Let him be free. He don't bother nobody.

ROSE Well, everybody got their own way of looking at it I guess. Come on and get your lunch. I got a bowl of lima beans and some cornbread in the oven. Come and get something to eat. Ain't no sense you fretting over Gabe.

ROSE *turns to go into the house.*

TROY Rose . . . got something to tell you.

ROSE Well, come on . . . wait till I get this food on the table.

TROY Rose!

She stops and turns around.

I don't know how to say this. (*Pause.*) I can't explain it none. It just sort of grows on you till it gets out of hand. It starts out like a little bush . . . and the next thing you know it's a whole forest.

ROSE Troy . . . what is you talking about?

TROY I'm talking, woman, let me talk. I'm trying to find a way to tell you . . . I'm gonna be a daddy. I'm gonna be somebody's daddy.

ROSE Troy . . . you're not telling me this? You're gonna be . . . what?

TROY Rose . . . now . . . see . . .

ROSE You telling me you gonna be somebody's daddy? You telling your *wife* this?

GABRIEL *enters from the street. He carries a rose in his hand.*

GABRIEL Hey, Troy! Hey, Rose!

ROSE I have to wait eighteen years to hear something like this.

GABRIEL Hey, Rose . . . I got a flower for you. (*He hands it to her.*) That's a rose. Same rose like you is.

ROSE Thanks, Gabe.

GABRIEL Troy, you ain't mad at me is you? Them bad mens come and put me away. You ain't mad at me is you?

TROY Naw, Gabe, I ain't mad at you.

ROSE Eighteen years and you wanna come with this.

GABRIEL (*takes a quarter out of his pocket*): See what I got? Got a brand new quarter.

TROY Rose . . . it's just . . .

ROSE Ain't nothing you can say, Troy. Ain't no way of explaining that.

GABRIEL Fellow that give me this quarter had a whole mess of them. I'm gonna keep this quarter till it stop shining.

ROSE Gabe, go on in the house there. I got some watermelon in the Frigidaire. Go on and get you a piece.

GABRIEL Say, Rose . . . you know I was chasing hellhounds and them bad mens come and get me and take me away. Troy helped me. He come down there and told them they better let me go before he beat them up. Yeah, he did!

ROSE You go on and get you a piece of watermelon, Gabe. Them bad mens is gone now.

GABRIEL Okay, Rose . . . gonna get me some watermelon. The kind with the stripes on it.

GABRIEL *exits into the house.*

ROSE Why, Troy? Why? After all these years to come dragging this in to me now. It don't make no sense at your age. I could have expected this ten or fifteen years ago, but not now.

TROY Age ain't got nothing to do with it, Rose.

ROSE I done tried to be everything a wife should be. Everything a wife could be. Been married eighteen years and I got to live to see the day you tell me you been seeing another woman and done fathered a child by her. And you know I ain't never wanted no half nothing in my family. My whole family is half. Everybody got different fathers and mothers . . . my two sisters and my brother. Can't hardly tell who's who. Can't never sit down and talk about Papa and Mama. It's your papa and your mama and my papa and my mama . . .

TROY Rose . . . stop it now.

ROSE I ain't never wanted that for none of my children. And now you wanna drag your behind in here and tell me something like this.

TROY You ought to know. It's time for you to know.

ROSE Well, I don't want to know, goddamn it!

TROY I can't just make it go away. It's done now. I can't wish the circumstance of the thing away.

ROSE And you don't want to either. Maybe you want to wish me and my boy away. Maybe that's what you want? Well, you can't wish us away. I've got eighteen years of my life invested in you. You ought to have stayed upstairs in my bed where you belong.

TROY Rose . . . now listen to me . . . we can get a handle on this thing. We can talk this out . . . come to an understanding.

ROSE All of a sudden it's "we." Where was "we" at when you was down there rolling around with some godforsaken woman? "We" should have come to an understanding before you started making a damn fool of yourself. You're a day late and a dollar short when it comes to an understanding with me.

TROY It's just . . . She gives me a different idea . . . a different understanding about myself. I can step out of this house and get away from the pressures and problems . . . be a different man. I ain't got to wonder how I'm gonna pay the bills or get the roof fixed. I can just be a part of myself that I ain't never been.

ROSE What I want to know . . . is do you plan to continue seeing her. That's all you can say to me.

TROY I can sit up in her house and laugh. Do you understand what I'm saying. I can laugh out loud . . . and it feels good. It reaches all the way down to the bottom of my shoes. (*Pause.*) Rose, I can't give that up.

ROSE Maybe you ought to go on and stay down there with her . . . if she's a better woman than me.

TROY It ain't about nobody being a better woman or nothing. Rose, you ain't the blame. A man couldn't ask for no woman to be a better wife than you've been. I'm responsible for it. I done locked myself into a pattern trying to take care of you all that I forgot about myself.

ROSE What the hell was I there for? That was my job, not somebody else's.

TROY Rose, I done tried all my life to live decent . . . to live a clean . . . hard . . . useful life. I tried to be a good husband to you. In every way I knew how. Maybe I come into the world backwards, I don't know. But . . . you born with two strikes on you before you come to the plate. You got to guard it closely . . . always looking for the curve ball on the inside corner. You can't afford to let none get past you. You can't afford a call strike. If you going down . . . you going down swinging. Everything lined up against you. What you gonna do. I fooled them, Rose. I bunted. When I found you and Cory and a halfway decent job . . . I was safe. Couldn't nothing touch me. I wasn't gonna strike out no more. I wasn't going back to the penitentiary. I wasn't gonna lay in the streets with a bottle of wine. I was safe. I had me a family. A job. I wasn't gonna get that last strike. I was on first looking for one of them boys to knock me in. To get me home.

ROSE You should have stayed in my bed, Troy.

TROY Then when I saw that gal . . . she firmed up my backbone. And I got to thinking that if I tried . . . I just might be able to steal second. Do you understand after eighteen years I wanted to steal second.

ROSE You should have held me tight. You should have grabbed me and held on.

TROY I stood on first base for eighteen years and I thought . . . well, goddamn it . . . go on for it!

ROSE We're not talking about baseball! We're talking about you going off to lay in bed with

another woman . . . and then bring it home to me. That's what we're talking about. We ain't talking about no baseball.

TROY Rose, you're not listening to me. I'm trying the best I can to explain it to you. It's not easy for me to admit that I been standing in the same place for eighteen years.

ROSE I been standing with you! I been right here with you, Troy. I got a life too. I gave eighteen years of my life to stand in the same spot with you. Don't you think I ever wanted other things? Don't you think I had dreams and hopes? What about my life? What about me. Don't you think it ever crossed my mind to want to know other men? That I wanted to lay up somewhere and forget about my responsibilities? That I wanted someone to make me laugh so I could feel good? You not the only one who's got wants and needs. But I held on to you, Troy. I took all my feelings, my wants and needs, my dreams . . . and I buried them inside you. I planted a seed and watched and prayed over it. I planted myself inside you and waited to bloom. And it didn't take me no eighteen years to find out the soil was hard and rocky and it wasn't never gonna bloom.

But I held on to you, Troy. I held you tighter. You was my husband. I owed you everything I had. Every part of me I could find to give you. And upstairs in that room . . . with the darkness falling in on me . . . I gave everything I had to try and erase the doubt that you wasn't the finest man in the world. And wherever you was going . . . I wanted to be there with you. Cause you was my husband. Cause that's the only way I was gonna survive as your wife. You always talking about what you give . . . and what you don't have to give. But you take too. You take . . . and don't even know nobody's giving!

ROSE *turns to exit into the house;* **TROY** *grabs her arm.*

TROY You say I take and don't give!

ROSE Troy! You're hurting me!

TROY You say I take and don't give!

ROSE Troy . . . you're hurting my arm! Let go!

TROY I done give you everything I got. Don't you tell that lie on me.

ROSE Troy!

TROY Don't you tell that lie on me!

CORY *enters from the house.*

Joan Marcus

This photograph is from a 2010 stage production of *Fences* starring Denzel Washington as Troy and Viola Davis as Rose. **In what ways does this photograph from a stage production of *Fences* capture the relationship between Troy and Rose?**

CORY Mama!

ROSE Troy. You're hurting me.

TROY Don't you tell me about no taking and giving.

CORY *comes up behind* **TROY** *and grabs him.* **TROY**, *surprised, is thrown off balance just as* **CORY** *throws a glancing blow that catches him on the chest and knocks him down.* **TROY** *is stunned, as is* **CORY**.

ROSE Troy. Troy. No!

TROY *gets to his feet and starts at* **CORY**.

Troy . . . no. Please! Troy!

ROSE *pulls on* **TROY** *to hold him back.* **TROY** *stops himself.*

TROY (*to* **CORY**): All right. That's strike two. You stay away from around me, boy. Don't you strike out. You living with a full count. Don't you strike out.

TROY *exits out the yard as the lights go down.*

Scene 2

It is six months later, early afternoon. **TROY** *enters from the house and starts to exit the yard.* **ROSE** *enters from the house.*

ROSE Troy, I want to talk to you.

TROY All of a sudden, after all this time, you want to talk to me, huh? You ain't wanted to talk to me for months. You ain't wanted to talk to me last night. You ain't wanted no part of me then. What you wanna talk to me about now?

ROSE Tomorrow's Friday.

TROY I know what day tomorrow is. You think I don't know tomorrow's Friday? My whole life I ain't done nothing but look to see Friday coming and you got to tell me it's Friday.

ROSE I want to know if you're coming home.

TROY I always come home, Rose. You know that. There ain't never been a night I ain't come home.

ROSE That ain't what I mean . . . and you know it. I want to know if you're coming straight home after work.

TROY I figure I'd cash my check . . . hang out at Taylors' with the boys . . . maybe play a game of checkers . . .

ROSE Troy, I can't live like this. I won't live like this. You livin' on borrowed time with me. It's been going on six months now you ain't been coming home.

TROY I be here every night. Every night of the year. That's 365 days.

ROSE I want you to come home tomorrow after work.

TROY Rose . . . I don't mess up my pay. You know that now. I take my pay and I give it to you. I don't have no money but what you give me back. I just want to have a little time to myself . . . a little time to enjoy life.

ROSE What about me? When's my time to enjoy life?

TROY I don't know what to tell you, Rose. I'm doing the best I can.

ROSE You ain't been home from work but time enough to change your clothes and run out . . . and you wanna call that the best you can do?

TROY I'm going over to the hospital to see Alberta. She went into the hospital this afternoon. Look like she might have the baby early. I won't be gone long.

ROSE Well, you ought to know. They went over to Miss Pearl's and got Gabe today. She said you told them to go ahead and lock him up.

TROY I ain't said no such thing. Whoever told you that is telling a lie. Pearl ain't doing nothing but telling a big fat lie.

ROSE She ain't had to tell me. I read it on the papers.

TROY I ain't told them nothing of the kind.

ROSE I saw it right there on the papers.

TROY What it say, huh?

ROSE It said you told them to take him.

TROY Then they screwed that up, just the way they screw up everything. I ain't worried about what they got on the paper.

ROSE Say the government send part of his check to the hospital and the other part to you.

TROY I ain't got nothing to do with that if that's the way it works. I ain't made up the rules about how it work.

ROSE You did Gabe just like you did Cory. You wouldn't sign the paper for Cory . . . but you signed for Gabe. You signed that paper.

The telephone is heard ringing inside the house.

TROY I told you I ain't signed nothing, woman! The only thing I signed was the release form. Hell, I can't read, I don't know what they had on that paper! I ain't signed nothing about sending Gabe away.

ROSE I said send him to the hospital . . . you said let him be free . . . now you done went down there and signed him to the hospital for half his money. You went back on yourself, Troy. You gonna have to answer for that.

TROY See now . . . you been over there talking to Miss Pearl. She done got mad cause she ain't getting Gabe's rent money. That's all it is. She's liable to say anything.

ROSE Troy, I seen where you signed the paper.

TROY You ain't seen nothing I signed. What she doing got papers on my brother anyway? Miss Pearl telling a big fat lie. And I'm gonna tell her about it too! You ain't seen nothing I signed. Say . . . you ain't seen nothing I signed.

ROSE *exits into the house to answer the telephone. Presently she returns.*

ROSE Troy . . . that was the hospital. Alberta had the baby.

TROY What she have? What is it?

ROSE It's a girl.

TROY I better get on down to the hospital to see her.

ROSE Troy . . .

TROY Rose . . . I got to go see her now. That's only right . . . what's the matter . . . the baby's all right, ain't it?

ROSE Alberta died having the baby.

TROY Died . . . you say she's dead? Alberta's dead?

ROSE They said they done all they could. They couldn't do nothing for her.

TROY The baby? How's the baby?

ROSE They say it's healthy. I wonder who's gonna bury her.

TROY She had family, Rose. She wasn't living in the world by herself.

ROSE I know she wasn't living in the world by herself.

TROY Next thing you gonna want to know if she had any insurance.

ROSE Troy, you ain't got to talk like that.

TROY That's the first thing that jumped out your mouth. "Who's gonna bury her?" Like I'm fixing to take on that task for myself.

ROSE I am your wife. Don't push me away.

TROY I ain't pushing nobody away. Just give me some space. That's all. Just give me some room to breathe.

ROSE *exits into the house.* **TROY** *walks about the yard.*

TROY (*with a quiet rage that threatens to consume him*): All right . . . Mr. Death. See now . . . I'm gonna tell you what I'm gonna do. I'm gonna take and build me a fence around this yard. See? I'm gonna build me a fence around what belongs to me. And then I want you to stay on the other side. See? You stay over there until you're ready for me. Then you come on. Bring your army. Bring your sickle. Bring your wrestling clothes. I ain't gonna fall down on my vigilance this time. You ain't gonna sneak up on me no more. When you ready for me . . . when the top of your list say Troy Maxson . . . that's when you come around here. You come up and knock on the front door. Ain't nobody else got nothing to do with this. This is between you and me. Man to man. You stay on the other side of that fence until you ready for me. Then you come up and knock on the front door. Anytime you want. I'll be ready for you.

The lights go down to black.

Scene 3

The lights come up on the porch. It is late evening three days later. **ROSE** *sits listening to the ball game waiting for* **TROY**. *The final out of the game is made and* **ROSE** *switches off the radio.* **TROY** *enters the yard carrying an infant wrapped in blankets. He stands back from the house and calls.*

ROSE *enters and stands on the porch. There is a long, awkward silence, the weight of which grows heavier with each passing second.*

TROY Rose . . . I'm standing here with my daughter in my arms. She ain't but a wee bittie little old thing. She don't know nothing about grownups' business. She innocent . . . and she ain't got no mama.

ROSE What you telling me for, Troy?

She turns and exits into the house.

TROY Well . . . I guess we'll just sit out here on the porch.

He sits down on the porch. There is an awkward indelicateness about the way he handles the baby. His largeness engulfs and seems to swallow it. He speaks loud enough for **ROSE** *to hear.*

A man's got to do what's right for him. I ain't sorry for nothing I done. It felt right in my heart. (*To the baby.*) What you smiling at? Your daddy's a big man. Got these great big old hands. But sometimes he's scared. And right now your daddy's scared cause we sitting out here and ain't got no home. Oh, I been homeless before. I ain't had no little baby with me. But I been homeless. You just be out on the road by your lonesome and you see one of them trains coming and you just kinda go like this . . .

He sings as a lullaby.

Please, Mr. Engineer let a man ride the line
Please, Mr. Engineer let a man ride the line
I ain't got no ticket please let me ride the blinds

ROSE *enters from the house.* **TROY**, *hearing her steps behind him, stands and faces her.*

She's my daughter, Rose. My own flesh and blood. I can't deny her no more than I can deny them boys. (*Pause.*) You and them boys is my family. You and them and this child is all I got in the world. So I guess what I'm saying is . . . I'd appreciate it if you'd help me take care of her.

ROSE Okay, Troy . . . you're right. I'll take care of your baby for you . . . cause . . . like you say . . . she's innocent . . . and you can't visit the sins of the father upon the child. A motherless child has got a hard time. (*She takes the baby from him.*) From right now . . . this child got a mother. But you a womanless man.

ROSE *turns and exits into the house with the baby. Lights go down to black.*

Scene 4

It is two months later. **LYONS** *enters from the street. He knocks on the door and calls.*

LYONS Hey, Rose! (*Pause.*): Rose!

ROSE (*from inside the house*): Stop that yelling. You gonna wake up Raynell. I just got her to sleep.

LYONS I just stopped by to pay Papa this twenty dollars I owe him. Where's Papa at?

ROSE He should be here in a minute. I'm getting ready to go down to the church. Sit down and wait on him.

LYONS I got to go pick up Bonnie over her mother's house.

ROSE Well, sit it down there on the table. He'll get it.

LYONS (*enters the house and sets the money on the table*): Tell Papa I said thanks. I'll see you again.

ROSE All right, Lyons. We'll see you.

LYONS *starts to exit as* **CORY** *enters.*

CORY Hey, Lyons.

LYONS What's happening, Cory? Say man, I'm sorry I missed your graduation. You know

I had a gig and couldn't get away. Otherwise, I would have been there, man. So what you doing?

CORY I'm trying to find a job.

LYONS Yeah I know how that go, man. It's rough out here. Jobs are scarce.

CORY Yeah, I know.

LYONS Look here, I got to run. Talk to Papa . . . he know some people. He'll be able to help get you a job. Talk to him . . . see what he say.

CORY Yeah . . . all right, Lyons.

LYONS: You take care. I'll talk to you soon. We'll find some time to talk.

LYONS *exits the yard.* **CORY** *wanders over to the tree, picks up the bat, and assumes a batting stance. He studies an imaginary pitcher and swings. Dissatisfied with the result, he tries again.* **TROY** *enters. They eye each other for a beat.* **CORY** *puts the bat down and exits the yard.* **TROY** *starts into the house as* **ROSE** *exits with* **RAYNELL**. *She is carrying a cake.*

TROY I'm coming in and everybody's going out.

ROSE I'm taking this cake down to the church for the bake sale. Lyons was by to see you. He stopped by to pay you your twenty dollars. It's laying in there on the table.

TROY (*going into his pocket*): Well . . . here go this money.

ROSE Put it in there on the table, Troy. I'll get it.

TROY What time you coming back?

ROSE Ain't no use in you studying me. It don't matter what time I come back.

TROY I just asked you a question, woman. What's the matter . . . can't I ask you a question?

ROSE Troy, I don't want to go into it. Your dinner's in there on the stove. All you got to do is heat it up. And don't you be eating the rest of them cakes in there. I'm coming back for them. We having a bake sale at the church tomorrow.

ROSE *exits the yard.* **TROY** *sits down on the steps, takes a pint bottle from his pocket, opens it, and drinks. He begins to sing*

TROY Hear it ring! Hear it ring!
Had an old dog his name was Blue
You know Blue was mighty true
You know Blue was a good old dog
Blue trees a possum in a hollow log
You know from that he was a good old dog

BONO *enters the yard.*

BONO Hey, Troy.

TROY Hey, what's happening, Bono?

BONO I just thought I'd stop by to see you.

TROY What you stop by and see me for? You ain't stopped by in a month of Sundays. Hell, I must owe you money or something.

BONO Since you got your promotion I can't keep up with you. Used to see you every day. Now I don't even know what route you working.

TROY They keep switching me around. Got me out in Greentree now . . . hauling white folks' garbage.

BONO Greentree, huh? You lucky, at least you ain't got to be lifting them barrels. Damn if they ain't getting heavier. I'm gonna put in my two years and call it quits.

TROY I'm thinking about retiring myself.

BONO You got it easy. You can *drive* for another five years.

TROY It ain't the same, Bono. It ain't like working the back of the truck. Ain't got nobody to talk to . . . feel like you working by yourself. Naw, I'm thinking about retiring. How's Lucille?

BONO She all right. Her arthritis get to acting up on her sometime. Saw Rose on my way in. She going down to the church, huh?

TROY Yeah, she took up going down there. All them preachers looking for somebody to fatten their pockets. (*Pause.*) Got some gin here.

BONO Naw, thanks. I just stopped by to say hello.

TROY Hell, nigger . . . you can take a drink. I ain't never known you to say no to a drink. You ain't got to work tomorrow.

BONO I just stopped by. I'm fixing to go over to

Skinner's. We got us a domino game going over his house every Friday.

TROY Nigger, you can't play no dominoes. I used to whup you four games out of five.

BONO Well, that learned me. I'm getting better.

TROY Yeah? Well, that's all right.

BONO Look here . . . I got to be getting on. Stop by sometime, huh?

TROY Yeah, I'll do that, Bono. Lucille told Rose you bought her a new refrigerator.

BONO Yeah, Rose told Lucille you had finally built your fence . . . so I figured we'd call it even.

TROY I knew you would.

BONO Yeah . . . okay. I'll be talking to you.

TROY Yeah, take care, Bono. Good to see you. I'm gonna stop over.

BONO Yeah. Okay, Troy.

BONO *exits.* **TROY** *drinks from the bottle.*

TROY Old Blue died and I dig his grave
Let him down with a golden chain
Every night when I hear old Blue bark
I know Blue treed a possum in Noah's Ark.
Hear it ring! Hear it ring!

CORY *enters the yard. They eye each other for a beat.* **TROY** *is sitting in the middle of the steps.* **CORY** *walks over.*

CORY I got to get by.

TROY Say what? What's you say?

CORY You in my way. I got to get by.

TROY You got to get by where? This is my house. Bought and paid for. In full. Took me fifteen years. And if you wanna go in my house and I'm sitting on the steps . . . you say excuse me. Like your mama taught you.

CORY Come on, Pop . . . I got to get by.

CORY *starts to maneuver his way past* **TROY**. **TROY** *grabs his leg and shoves him back.*

TROY You just gonna walk over top of me?

CORY I live here too!

TROY (*advancing toward him*): You just gonna walk over top of me in my own house?

CORY I ain't scared of you.

TROY I ain't asked if you was scared of me. I asked you if you was fixing to walk over top of me in my own house? That's the question. You ain't gonna say excuse me? You just gonna walk over top of me?

CORY If you wanna put it like that.

TROY How else am I gonna put it?

CORY I was walking by you to go into the house cause you sitting on the steps drunk, singing to yourself. You can put it like that.

TROY Without saying excuse me???

CORY *doesn't respond.*

I asked you a question. Without saying excuse me???

CORY I ain't got to say excuse me to you. You don't count around here no more.

TROY Oh, I see . . . I don't count around here no more. You ain't got to say excuse me to your daddy. All of a sudden you done got so grown that your daddy don't count around here no more . . . Around here in his own house and yard that he done paid for with the sweat of his brow. You done got so grown to where you gonna take over. You gonna take over my house. Is that right? You gonna wear my pants. You gonna go in there and stretch out on my bed. You ain't got to say excuse me cause I don't count around here no more. Is that right?

CORY That's right. You always talking this dumb stuff. Now, why don't you just get out my way?

TROY I guess you got someplace to sleep and something to put in your belly. You got that, huh? You got that? That's what you need. You got that, huh?

CORY You don't know what I got. You ain't got to worry about what I got.

TROY You right! You one hundred percent right! I done spent the last seventeen years worrying about what you got. Now it's your turn, see? I'll tell you what to do. You grown . . . we done established that. You a man. Now, let's see you act like one. Turn your behind around and walk out this yard. And when you get out there in the alley . . . you can forget

about this house. See? Cause this is my house. You go on and be a man and get your own house. You can forget about this. Cause this is mine. You go on and get yours cause I'm through with doing for you.

CORY You talking about what you did for me . . . what'd you ever give me?

TROY Them feet and bones! That pumping heart, nigger! I give you more than anybody else is ever gonna give you.

CORY You ain't never gave me nothing! You ain't never done nothing but hold me back. Afraid I was gonna be better than you. All you ever did was try and make me scared of you. I used to tremble every time you called my name. Every time I heard your footsteps in the house. Wondering all the time . . . what's Papa gonna say if I do this? . . . What's he gonna say if I do that? . . . What's Papa gonna say if I turn on the radio? And Mama, too . . . she tries . . . but she's scared of you.

TROY You leave your mama out of this. She ain't got nothing to do with this.

CORY I don't know how she stand you . . . after what you did to her.

TROY I told you to leave your mama out of this!

He advances toward **CORY**.

CORY What you gonna do . . . give me a whupping? You can't whup me no more. You're too old. You just an old man.

TROY (*shoves him on his shoulder*): Nigger! That's what you are. You just another nigger on the street to me!

CORY You crazy! You know that?

TROY Go on now! You got the devil in you. Get on away from me!

CORY You just a crazy old man . . . talking about I got the devil in me.

TROY Yeah, I'm crazy! If you don't get on the other side of that yard . . . I'm gonna show you how crazy I am! Go on . . . get the hell out of my yard.

CORY It ain't your yard. You took Uncle Gabe's money he got from the army to buy this house and then you put him out.

This photograph of James Earl Jones as Troy Maxson in the 1987 Broadway production of *Fences* is entitled, "Troy Maxson takes a swing at death." **How does this image capture the ambiguity of a central metaphor in the play?**

TROY (*advances on* **CORY**): Get your black ass out of my yard!

TROY'*s advance backs* **CORY** *up against the tree.* **CORY** *grabs up the bat.*

CORY I ain't going nowhere! Come on . . . put me out! I ain't scared of you.

TROY That's my bat!

CORY Come on!

TROY Put my bat down!

CORY Come on, put me out.

CORY *swings at* **TROY**, *who backs across the yard.*

What's the matter? You so bad . . . put me out!

TROY *advances toward* **CORY**.

CORY (*backing up*): Come on! Come on!

TROY You're gonna have to use it! You wanna draw that bat back on me . . . you're gonna have to use it.

CORY Come on! . . . Come on!

CORY *swings the bat at* **TROY** *a second time. He misses.* **TROY** *continues to advance toward him.*

TROY You're gonna have to kill me! You wanna draw that bat back on me. You're gonna have to kill me.

CORY, *backed up against the tree, can go no farther.* **TROY** *taunts him. He sticks out his head and offers him a target.*

Come on! Come on!

CORY *is unable to swing the bat.* **TROY** *grabs it.*

TROY Then I'll show you.

CORY *and* **TROY** *struggle over the bat. The struggle is fierce and fully engaged.* **TROY** *ultimately is the stronger and takes the bat from* **CORY** *and stands over him ready to swing. He stops himself.*

Go on and get away from around my house.

CORY, *stung by his defeat, picks himself up, walks slowly out of the yard and up the alley.*

CORY Tell Mama I'll be back for my things.

TROY They'll be on the other side of that fence.

CORY *exits.*

TROY I can't taste nothing. Helluljah! I can't taste nothing no more. (**TROY** *assumes a batting posture and begins to taunt Death, the fastball on the outside corner.*) Come on! It's between you and me now! Come on! Anytime you want! Come on! I be ready for you . . . but I ain't gonna be easy.

The lights go down on the scene.

Scene 5

The time is 1965. The lights come up in the yard. It is the morning of **TROY***'s funeral. A funeral plaque with a light hangs beside the door. There is a small garden plot off to the side. There is noise and activity in the house as* **ROSE**, **LYONS**, *and* **BONO** *have gathered. The door opens and* **RAYNELL**, *seven years old, enters dressed in a flannel nightgown. She crosses to the garden and pokes around with a stick.* **ROSE** *calls from the house.*

ROSE Raynell!

RAYNELL Mam?

ROSE What you doing out there?

RAYNELL Nothing.

ROSE *comes to the door.*

ROSE Girl, get in here and get dressed. What you doing?

RAYNELL Seeing if my garden growed.

ROSE I told you it ain't gonna grow overnight. You got to wait.

RAYNELL It don't look like it never gonna grow. Dag!

ROSE I told you a watched pot never boils. Get in here and get dressed.

RAYNELL This ain't even no pot, Mama.

ROSE You just have to give it a chance. It'll grow. Now you come on and do what I told you. We got to be getting ready. This ain't no morning to be playing around. You hear me?

RAYNELL Yes, Mam.

ROSE *exits into the house.* **RAYNELL** *continues to poke at her garden with a stick.* **CORY** *enters. He is dressed in a Marine corporal's uniform, and carries a duffel bag. His posture is that of a military man, and his speech has a clipped sternness.*

CORY (*to* **RAYNELL**): Hi. (*Pause.*) I bet your name is Raynell.

RAYNELL Uh huh.

CORY Is your mama home?

RAYNELL *runs up on the porch and calls through the screen door.*

RAYNELL Mama . . . there's some man out here. Mama?

ROSE *comes to the door.*

ROSE Cory? Lord have mercy! Look here, you all!

ROSE *and* **CORY** *embrace in a tearful reunion as* **BONO** *and* **LYONS** *enter from the house dressed in funeral clothes.*

BONO Aw, looka here . . .
ROSE Done got all grown up!
CORY Don't cry, Mama. What you crying about?
ROSE I'm just so glad you made it.
CORY Hey Lyons. How you doing, Mr. Bono.

LYONS *goes to embrace* **CORY**.

LYONS Look at you, man. Look at you. Don't he look good, Rose. Got them Corporal stripes.
ROSE What took you so long?
CORY You know how the Marines are, Mama. They got to get all their paperwork straight before they let you do anything.
ROSE Well, I'm sure glad you made it. They let Lyons come. Your Uncle Gabe's still in the hospital. They don't know if they gonna let him out or not. I just talked to them a little while ago.
LYONS A Corporal in the United States Marines.
BONO Your daddy knew you had it in you. He used to tell me all the time.
LYONS Don't he look good, Mr. Bono?
BONO Yeah, he remind me of Troy when I first met him. (*Pause.*) Say, Rose, Lucille's down at the church with the choir. I'm gonna go down and get the pallbearers lined up. I'll be back to get you all.
ROSE Thanks, Jim.
CORY See you, Mr. Bono.
LYONS (*with his arm around* **RAYNELL**): Cory . . . look at Raynell. Ain't she precious? She gonna break a whole lot of hearts.
ROSE Raynell, come and say hello to your brother. This is your brother, Cory. You remember Cory.
RAYNELL No, Mam.
CORY She don't remember me, Mama.
ROSE Well, we talk about you. She heard us talk about you. (*To* **RAYNELL**.) This is your brother, Cory. Come on and say hello.
RAYNELL Hi.
CORY Hi. So you're Raynell. Mama told me a lot about you.
ROSE You all come on into the house and let me fix you some breakfast. Keep up your strength.
CORY I ain't hungry, Mama.
LYONS You can fix me something, Rose. I'll be in there in a minute.
ROSE Cory, you sure you don't want nothing? I know they ain't feeding you right.
CORY No, Mama . . . thanks. I don't feel like eating. I'll get something later.
ROSE Raynell . . . get on upstairs and get that dress on like I told you.

ROSE *and* **RAYNELL** *exit into the house.*

LYONS So . . . I hear you thinking about getting married.
CORY Yeah, I done found the right one, Lyons. It's about time.
LYONS Me and Bonnie been split up about four years now. About the time Papa retired. I guess she just got tired of all them changes I was putting her through. (*Pause.*) I always knew you was gonna make something out yourself. Your head was always in the right direction. So . . . you gonna stay in . . . make it a career . . . put in your twenty years?
CORY I don't know. I got six already, I think that's enough.
LYONS Stick with Uncle Sam and retire early. Ain't nothing out here. I guess Rose told you what happened with me. They got me down the workhouse. I thought I was being slick cashing other people's checks.
CORY How much time you doing?
LYONS They give me three years. I got that beat now. I ain't got but nine more months. It ain't so bad. You learn to deal with it like anything else. You got to take the crookeds with the straights. That's what Papa used to say. He used to say that when he struck out. I seen him strike out three times in a row . . . and the next time up he hit the ball over the grandstand. Right out there in Homestead Field. He wasn't satisfied hitting in the seats . . . he want to hit it over everything! After the game he had two hundred people standing around waiting to shake his hand.

You got to take the crookeds with the straights. Yeah, Papa was something else.

CORY You still playing?

LYONS Cory . . . you know I'm gonna do that. There's some fellows down there we got us a band . . . we gonna try and stay together when we get out . . . but yeah, I'm still playing. It still helps me to get out of bed in the morning. As long as it do that I'm gonna be right there playing and trying to make some sense out of it.

ROSE (*calling*): Lyons, I got these eggs in the pan.

LYONS Let me go on and get these eggs, man. Get ready to go bury Papa. (*Pause.*) How you doing? You doing all right?

CORY *nods.* **LYONS** *touches him on the shoulder and they share a moment of silent grief.* **LYONS** *exits into the house.* **CORY** *wanders about the yard.* **RAYNELL** *enters.*

RAYNELL Hi.

CORY Hi.

RAYNELL Did you used to sleep in my room?

CORY Yeah . . . that used to be my room.

RAYNELL That's what Papa call it. "Cory's room." It got your football in the closet.

ROSE *comes to the door.*

ROSE Raynell, get in there and get them good shoes on.

RAYNELL Mama, can't I wear these? Them other one hurt my feet.

ROSE Well, they just gonna have to hurt your feet for a while. You ain't said they hurt your feet when you went down to the store and got them.

RAYNELL They didn't hurt then. My feet done got bigger.

ROSE Don't you give me no backtalk now. You get in there and get them shoes on.

RAYNELL *exits into the house.*

Ain't too much changed. He still got that piece of rag tied to that tree. He was out here swinging that bat. I was just ready to go back in the house. He swung that bat and then he just fell over. Seem like he swung it and stood there with this grin on his face . . . and then he just fell over. They carried him on down to the hospital, but I knew there wasn't no need . . . why don't you come on in the house?

CORY Mama . . . I got something to tell you. I don't know how to tell you this . . . but I've got to tell you . . . I'm not going to Papa's funeral.

ROSE Boy, hush your mouth. That's your daddy you talking about. I don't want hear that kind of talk this morning. I done raised you to come to this? You standing there all healthy and grown talking about you ain't going to your daddy's funeral?

CORY Mama . . . listen . . .

ROSE I don't want to hear it, Cory. You just get that thought out of your head.

CORY I can't drag Papa with me everywhere I go. I've got to say no to him. One time in my life I've got to say no.

ROSE Don't nobody have to listen to nothing like that. I know you and your daddy ain't seen eye to eye, but I ain't got to listen to that kind of talk this morning. Whatever was between you and your daddy . . . the time has come to put it aside. Just take it and set it over there on the shelf and forget about it. Disrespecting your daddy ain't gonna make you a man, Cory. You got to find a way to come to that on your own. Not going to your daddy's funeral ain't gonna make you a man.

CORY The whole time I was growing up . . . living in his house . . . Papa was like a shadow that followed you everywhere. It weighed on you and sunk into your flesh. It would wrap around you and lay there until you couldn't tell which one was you anymore. That shadow digging in your flesh. Trying to crawl in. Trying to live through you. Everywhere I looked, Troy Maxson was staring back at me . . . hiding under the bed . . . in the closet. I'm just saying I've got to find a way to get rid of that shadow, Mama.

ROSE You just like him. You got him in you good.

CORY Don't tell me that, Mama.

ROSE You Troy Maxson all over again.

CORY I don't want to be Troy Maxson. I want to be me.

ROSE You can't be nobody but who you are, Cory. That shadow wasn't nothing but you growing into yourself. You either got to grow into it or cut it down to fit you. But that's all you got to make life with. That's all you got to measure yourself against that world out there. Your daddy wanted you to be everything he wasn't . . . and at the same time he tried to make you into everything he was. I don't know if he was right or wrong . . . but I do know he meant to do more good than he meant to do harm. He wasn't always right. Sometimes when he touched he bruised. And sometimes when he took me in his arms he cut.

When I first met your daddy I thought . . . Here is a man I can lay down with and make a baby. That's the first thing I thought when I seen him. I was thirty years old and had done seen my share of men. But when he walked up to me and said, "I can dance a waltz that'll make you dizzy," I thought, Rose Lee, here is a man that you can open yourself up to and be filled to bursting. Here is a man that can fill all them empty spaces you been tipping around the edges of. One of them empty spaces was being somebody's mother.

I married your daddy and settled down to cooking his supper and keeping clean sheets on the bed. When your daddy walked through the house he was so big he filled it up. That was my first mistake. Not to make him leave some room for me. For my part in the matter. But at that time I wanted that. I wanted a house that I could sing in. And that's what your daddy gave me. I didn't know to keep up his strength I had to give up little pieces of mine. I did that. I took on his life as mine and mixed up the pieces so that you couldn't hardly tell which was which anymore. It was my choice. It was my life and I didn't have to live it like that. But that's what life offered me in the way of being a woman and I took it. I grabbed hold of it with both hands.

August Wilson has said that this collage by African American artist Romare Bearden inspired *Fences*. **What elements in this work do you see reflected in the play? What characteristics do the two share?**

Art © Romare Bearden Foundation / Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY

By the time Raynell came into the house, me and your daddy had done lost touch with one another. I didn't want to make my blessing off of nobody's misfortune . . . but I took on to Raynell like she was all them babies I had wanted and never had.

The phone rings.

Like I'd been blessed to relive a part of my life. And if the Lord see fit to keep up my strength . . . I'm gonna do her just like your daddy did you . . . I'm gonna give her the best of what's in me.

RAYNELL (*entering, still with her old shoes*): Mama . . . Reverend Tollivier on the phone.

ROSE *exits into the house.*

RAYNELL Hi.

CORY Hi.

RAYNELL You in the Army or the Marines?

CORY Marines.

RAYNELL Papa said it was the Army. Did you know Blue?

CORY Blue? Who's Blue?

RAYNELL Papa's dog what he sing about all the time.

CORY (*singing*): Hear it ring! Hear it ring!
I had a dog his name was Blue
You know Blue was mighty true
You know Blue was a good old dog
Blue treed a possum in a hollow log
You know from that he was a good old dog.
Hear it ring! Hear it ring!

RAYNELL *joins in singing.*

CORY AND RAYNELL Blue treed a possum out on a limb
Blue looked at me and I looked at him
Grabbed that possum and put him in a sack
Blue stayed there till I came back
Old Blue's feets was big and round
Never allowed a possum to touch the ground.
Old Blue died and I dug his grave
I dug his grave with a silver spade
Let him down with a golden chain
And every night I call his name
Go on Blue, you good dog you
Go on Blue, you good dog you

RAYNELL Blue laid down and died like a man
Blue laid down and died . . .

BOTH Blue laid down and died like a man
Now he's treeing possums in the Promised Land
I'm gonna tell you this to let you know
Blue's gone where the good dogs go
When I hear old Blue bark
When I hear old Blue bark
Blue treed a possum in Noah's Ark
Blue treed a possum in Noah's Ark.

ROSE *comes to the screen door.*

ROSE Cory, we gonna be ready to go in a minute.

CORY (*to* **RAYNELL**): You go on in the house and change them shoes like Mama told you so we can go to Papa's funeral.

RAYNELL Okay, I'll be back.

RAYNELL *exits into the house.* **CORY** *gets up and crosses over to the tree.* **ROSE** *stands in the screen door watching him.* **GABRIEL** *enters from the alley.*

GABRIEL (*calling*): Hey, Rose!

ROSE Gabe?

GABRIEL I'm here, Rose. Hey Rose, I'm here!

ROSE *enters from the house.*

ROSE Lord . . . Look here, Lyons!

LYONS See, I told you, Rose . . . I told you they'd let him come.

CORY How you doing, Uncle Gabe?

LYONS How you doing, Uncle Gabe?

GABRIEL Hey, Rose. It's time. It's time to tell St. Peter to open the gates. Troy, you ready? You ready, Troy. I'm gonna tell St. Peter to open the gates. You get ready now.

GABRIEL, *with great fanfare, braces himself to blow. The trumpet is without a mouthpiece. He puts the end of it into his mouth and blows with great force, like a man who has been waiting some twenty-odd years for this single moment. No sound comes out of the trumpet. He braces himself and blows again with the same result. A third time he blows. There is a weight of impossible description that falls away and leaves him bare and exposed to a frightful realization. It is a trauma that a sane and normal mind would be unable to withstand. He begins to dance. A slow, strange dance, eerie and life-giving. A dance of atavistic signature and ritual.* **LYONS** *attempts to embrace him.* **GABRIEL** *pushes* **LYONS** *away. He begins to howl in what is an attempt at song, or perhaps a song turning back into itself in an attempt at speech. He finishes his dance and the gates of heaven stand open as wide as God's closet.*

That's the way that go!

[1985]

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Troy Maxson's last name makes subtle reference to the Mason-Dixon Line — the imaginary line that in the 1820s divided slave states from free states. How does this allusion to history help prepare you for the play's themes? What are the connotations of other characters' names — for example, *Rose* and *Gabriel*?
2. What is the significance of the biblical and supernatural allusions that appear throughout the play? Consider the story of Troy getting furniture from the devil, and the behavior and history of Gabriel.
3. In the stage directions for act I, scene 1, August Wilson describes Troy as "a large man with thick, heavy hands; it is this largeness that he strives to fill out and make an accommodation with." How does this description establish the character of Troy? Consider also Troy's encounters with Death — the way he taunts Death to come and get him, asserting that he will go down swinging. What might Wilson be saying about Troy's character with these descriptions?
4. How does Rose's assertion in act I, scene 1, that "Times have changed" (l. 240) set the mood for the action that follows? How does it anticipate the themes Wilson will explore more specifically through his characters and the action of the play?
5. How do you interpret Lyons's response to his father's criticism of his lifestyle: "I know I got to eat. But I got to live too. I need something that gonna help me to get out of the bed in the morning. Make me feel like I belong in the world" (I.1.560–63)? Discuss what it is that makes each of the central characters feel some sense of belonging in the world: Troy, Rose, Lyons, and Cory.
6. What role does Bono play in the development of Troy's character? Pick a scene that you think shows Bono's role most clearly, and then explain.
7. At the opening of act I, scene 2, Rose is hanging up clothes in the early morning, humming and singing to herself. Her song imploring Jesus to "be a fence all around me every day" reflects one of the play's important themes. How do different characters relate to and define fences? Whom do fences keep out, and whom do they enclose? Consider also how fences relate to baseball. Explain why this is an appropriate title for the play.
8. In act I, scene 3, Troy explains why he refuses to sign Cory's recruitment papers: "The white man ain't gonna let you get nowhere with that football noway. You go on and get your book-learning so you can work yourself up in that A&P or learn how to fix cars or build houses or something, get you a trade. That way you have something can't nobody take away from you. You go on and learn how to put your hands to some good use. Besides hauling people's garbage" (ll. 193–202). Could there be more to his refusal than the explanation he offers? Explain.
9. What is the significance of Troy's triumph at work, earning the right to drive the garbage truck (act I, scene 4)? What is ironic about this victory? How and why does his promotion affect his relationship with Bono?
10. Why do you think the playwright chose not to have Alberta make an appearance on stage? How does she appear in your imagination? How would you describe her?
11. Is Troy a hypocrite? Do his relationships with Alberta and Cory make his assertions regarding family responsibilities and duty ring false?
12. When Cory returns after Troy's death, he tells Rose, "I can't drag Papa with me everywhere I go. I've got to say no to him" (II.5.166–67). What finally convinces Cory to attend Troy's funeral? What does his attending the funeral suggest about what Cory's future might hold and what kind of home and family he will have? Has he said "no" to his father?

QUESTIONS ON STYLE AND STRUCTURE

1. Three texts, all written by Wilson, precede the actual opening of the play: a four-line poem, a description of the setting, and a more discursive piece entitled "The Play." Although these texts provide specific information, they also raise larger issues. What are some of these? Pay particular attention to the language Wilson uses ("in His Largeness and Laws," "the porch lacks congruence," "The city devoured them," "new energies that used loyalty and patriotism as its fuel").
2. In act I, scene 1, Troy's friend Bono chides him about "that Alberta gal" (ll. 54–55). What is significant about

the introduction of this complicating element before we meet Troy's wife? What might this foreshadow in the play? How does this teasing introduce a complication within the play's exposition?

3. Early in the play (act I, scene 1), Wilson's stage direction for Rose indicates that she "alternates between the porch and the kitchen." Throughout the play, she is associated with food and preparation. Examine specific passages and examples, and discuss how Wilson uses this association to develop the character of Rose.
4. Why do you think Wilson holds off until the end of act I to have Troy reveal his past and his own confrontation with his father at age fourteen? Why does Wilson have Troy tell the story as a flashback to Lyons and Bono rather than to Cory? Pay special attention to Troy's tone; how does this section contribute to your understanding of his character?
5. Much of the play is concerned with money: earning it, owing it, paying for things. Yet Wilson alerts us to a metaphorical level when Troy insists, "Life don't owe you nothing. You owe it to yourself" (I.1.551–52). Discuss how the language of commerce — debt, payment, purchase, cheating — develops important themes in the play.
6. What do you think is the climax of *Fences*? Explain your reasoning.
7. Much of *Fences* is written in dialect, depicting the natural speech patterns of the characters in the play. In one example, Troy teases Rose with: "I'm studying you . . . fixing to do my homework!" (I.3.35–36). In other instances, Wilson brings in dialect through songs the characters recall or sing. How does the dialect affect your understanding of the play? Do you find that the style of the characters' language, which reflects the period when the action occurs, dates the play for contemporary viewers?
8. In act II, scene 1, Troy uses baseball metaphors ("steal second," "stood on first base for eighteen years") to explain his affair with Alberta to Rose. How is this use of language consistent with Troy's character? On what basis does Rose reject the comparison? Consider the metaphor she chooses as she counters with an explanation of how she has tried to live her life.
9. Wilson has described *Fences* as having a "blues aesthetic." Songs, and particularly the blues, play an important role in Wilson's plays. Where do you see the influence of the blues on *Fences*? Is it in the diction? the syntax? the themes? the structure? Or does it show itself in some other way?
10. The character of Gabriel has puzzled readers, audiences, and even directors; one even suggested that he be dropped from the script to keep from confusing audiences. Some see him as a spiritual presence with a visible link to the African past. What elements of plot and character depend on him? Explain how you do or do not see Gabriel as essential to *Fences*. Include the final scene in your interpretation.

SUGGESTIONS FOR WRITING

1. Rose is a character who has provoked a great deal of controversy: some see her as a strong matriarch who holds her family together, while others argue that she enables Troy's worst behaviors. Write an essay explaining your view of Rose. Consider both her assertion that she "ain't never wanted no half nothing in [her] family" (II.1.275–76) and her decision to bring Raynell into the Maxson family.
2. In the description of Troy Maxson that precedes the play, Wilson writes, "at times he can be crude and almost vulgar, though he is capable of rising to profound heights of expression." Write an essay analyzing the character of Troy as embodying this tension. Discuss which inclination you believe ultimately prevails.
3. Tragic heroes possess a character flaw or commit an error of judgment that leads to their downfall and a reversal of fortune. Write an essay explaining why you believe that Troy is a tragic hero, paying careful attention to ways in which this play diverges from the classical model.
4. *Fences* is most often interpreted as a "generational play." In fact, August Wilson scholar Sandra Shannon describes a 1997 production in Beijing with an all-Chinese cast in which both audience members and actors found that "their connections to *Fences* seemed to have had more to do with the shifting of a powerful nation's economic and generational center from one determined by tradition to one responding to the trappings of

modernization." Discuss the generational conflicts in this play, and consider how they are reflective of more universal experiences than ones specific to the African American experience.

5. Write a eulogy to be read at Troy Maxson's funeral. Include details from his life that would help mourners see that "he meant to do more good than he meant to do harm" (II.5.207–9). Choose the speaker of your eulogy carefully. It could be any of the characters in the play, or someone else entirely.
6. Imagine that ten years have elapsed since Troy's death, and Cory and Lyons return home to celebrate Rose's birthday. Write a dialogue between the half brothers in which they reminisce about their father.
7. Troy Maxson took part in the Great Migration of rural blacks from the South to urban centers in the North. The artist Jacob Lawrence has chronicled this journey in his Migration Series. The series is housed in the Museum of Modern Art in New York, but the images are available online at www.phillipscollection.org/migration_series. Choose one painting that particularly appeals to you, and write about how it helps you visualize the historical movement.
8. Throughout the play, Troy uses baseball metaphors to explain how he thinks and feels. Try omitting the metaphor and rewriting Troy's speech to Rose in act II, scene 1, more literally (beginning with "But . . . you born with two strikes on you before you come to the plate" on lines 341–42). How does the loss of the baseball metaphor affect the power of the speech?
9. The time frame of *Fences* spans several major historical moments for African Americans in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: Reconstruction, the Great Migration, the Great Depression, and the civil rights movement. Write an essay explaining how the historical and social forces of these eras are reflected either in the play as a whole or in the character of Troy Maxson.

The Metamorphosis

FRANZ KAFKA

Photo by ullstein bild/ullstein bild via Getty Images

Translated by Alexis Walker

Born in Prague, Czechoslovakia, to middle-class Jewish parents, Franz Kafka (1883–1924) spoke Czech in his childhood but studied in German-speaking schools. He graduated from the Charles-Ferdinand University in Prague with a law degree. Kafka was employed for many years at the Workers' Accident Insurance Institute, and he wrote after his working hours. He published *The Metamorphosis* (1915) and *The Penal Colony* (1919) during his lifetime. After his death from tuberculosis, three other novels were published, despite his request that the manuscripts be destroyed: *The Trial* (1925), *The Castle* (1926), and *Amerika* (1927). Over the course of his life, Kafka wrote hundreds of letters to family and close friends, including his father, with whom he had a strained and formal relationship. Michiko Kakutani, Pulitzer Prize–winning critic for the *New York Times*, has said that Kafka's letters and works of fiction share "the same nervous attention to minute particulars; the same paranoid awareness of shifting balances of power; the same atmosphere of emotional suffocation — combined, surprisingly enough, with moments of boyish ardor and delight."

I

When Gregor Samsa awoke in his bed one morning from unquiet dreams, he found himself transformed into an enormous insect.* He lay on a back as hard as armor and saw, when he raised his head slightly, a jutting brown underbelly divided into arching segments. The bedcovers could barely cover it; they threatened to slide off altogether. His many legs, pitifully thin in comparison with the rest of his bulk, fluttered helplessly before his eyes.

"What has happened to me?" he thought. It wasn't a dream. His room — a decent enough room for a person, if slightly too small — lay quietly between the four familiar walls. Over the table on which was spread his unpacked collections of fabric samples — Samsa was a traveling salesman — hung the picture that he had recently cut out of an illustrated magazine and fit into an attractive gilt frame. The picture was of a woman clad in a fur hat and a fur stole; she sat upright and held out to the viewer a thick fur muff into which her entire forearm disappeared.

Gregor's gaze then directed itself to the window. The dreary weather — one could hear raindrops hit the metal awning over the window — made him quite melancholy. "What if I slept a bit longer and forgot all this foolishness," he thought. But that was altogether

* Translator's note: The closest English equivalents to the German word Kafka uses here (*Ungeziefer*) are "vermin" and "pest"—the German word denotes parasitic and otherwise objectionable creatures (including fleas, lice, rats, mice, etc.) and connotes uncleanness. "Insect" is a compromise: though at once more specific and less evocative than the original, it sidesteps problems of agreement ("vermin" being almost always plural in English) and of tone ("pest" being more colloquial than the German *Ungeziefer*).

impossible, because he was used to sleeping on his right side, and his current condition made working himself into this position impossible. No matter how vigorously he swung himself over to the right, he immediately rolled again onto his back. He tried what seemed hundreds of times, closing his eyes in order to avoid having to see his wriggling legs. He finally gave up only when he began to feel in his side a small dull ache that he had never felt before.

"Oh, God," he thought, "what a strenuous profession I've chosen — traveling day in, day out! The demands of business are far greater on the road than they are at the home office, and I'm burdened with the annoyances of travel besides: the worry about train connections; the irregular, bad meals; a social life limited to passing acquaintances who never become real friends. To hell with it!" He felt an itch on his belly, and he shoved himself back against the bedpost so he could lift his head more easily. He found the spot that itched: it was covered with small white dots that he couldn't identify. He went to touch the spot with one of his legs but drew it back immediately, because the touch made him shudder.

He slid back into his former position. "This early rising," he thought, "can make you into a complete idiot. A man needs his sleep. Other travelers live like women in a harem. When, for example, I go back to my hotel during the course of the morning to write up orders, these gentlemen are just sitting down to breakfast. I should try that with the Director: I'd be fired on the spot. Who knows, though — that might be good for me. If it weren't for my parents, I would have given notice long ago: I would have confronted the Director and given him a piece of my mind. He would have fallen off his chair! It's incredible the way he has of sitting perched at his reading desk and speaking from on high to employees who, on top of everything, have to draw very near owing to his slight deafness. Oh well, I shouldn't give up hope altogether: once I have the money to pay off my parents' debt — it should only be another five or six years — I'll definitely do it. Then I'll make my big break. In the meantime, I have to get up — my train leaves at five."

And he looked over at the alarm clock that ticked on the bureau. "God in heaven!" he thought. It was six-thirty, and the hands of the clock went quietly on; it was even later than six-thirty — it was closer to six-forty-five. Shouldn't the alarm have gone off? He could see from the bed that it was correctly set for four o'clock; it must have gone off. But was it possible to sleep peacefully through that furniture-rattling noise? Of course, he hadn't actually slept peacefully, but he had no doubt for that reason slept more deeply. But what should he do now? The next train left at seven o'clock. In order to catch that one, he'd have to rush like a madman, and his samples weren't packed up yet. He hardly felt alert or energetic enough. And even if he caught the train, he wouldn't avoid the Director's wrath, because the office porter had been waiting at the five-o'clock train and would long since have reported his failure to appear. The porter was completely under the Director's thumb — he had neither a backbone nor brains. What if Gregor were to report himself sick? But that would be highly awkward and suspicious, because he had not been sick once in five years of service. The Director would certainly come with the insurance doctor. He would reproach his parents for their lazy son and dismiss all rejoinders by referring them to the doctor, who considered all people completely healthy, but work-averse. And would he be so wrong in this case? Gregor actually felt completely fine, despite a fatigue completely unwarranted after such a long sleep. He even had a powerful appetite.

As he thought all this over hurriedly, without being able to decide whether to leave his bed — the clock had just struck six-forty-five — there was a knock on the door near the head of his

bed. "Gregor," he heard — it was his mother — "it's a quarter to seven. Weren't you going on a trip?" What a gentle voice! Gregor was terrified when he heard his answer. It was unmistakably in his old voice, but had mixed in, as if from down deep, an irrepressible, painful, squeaking noise, which allowed words to be heard clearly when first uttered, but as they resonated, distorted them to such an extent that they were difficult to understand. Gregor had wanted to answer in detail and explain everything, but in light of the circumstances he limited himself to saying: "Yes, yes, thanks, Mother, I'm getting up." The wooden door seemed to make the change in Gregor's voice imperceptible outside the room, because his mother was satisfied with his explanation and shuffled away. But through this brief exchange the other family members had become aware that Gregor was unexpectedly still at home, and his father was already knocking on one side door — lightly, but with his fist. "Gregor, Gregor," he called, "What's going on?" And after a short pause he urged again, with a deeper voice: Gregor! Gregor!" At the other side door, his sister fretted softly: "Gregor? Are you ill? Do you need something?" To both sides, Gregor answered, "I'm just about ready to go," and he made an effort to ban anything conspicuous from his voice by the most painstaking enunciation and by inserting long pauses between individual words. His father returned to his breakfast, but his sister whispered: "Gregor, open up, I beg you." Gregor had no intention of opening the door, however — instead he gave thanks for his habitual precaution, born of much travel, of locking all doors during the night, even at home.

First he wanted to get up, quietly and undisturbed, get dressed, and above all eat breakfast — only then did he want to think over what came next, because he could see that he would come to no reasonable conclusions as long as he lay in bed. In the past he had often felt one mild pain or another while lying in bed, possibly from lying in an awkward position, that proved to be sheer imagination once he got up. He was eager to see how today's fantasies would gradually resolve themselves. He didn't doubt in the least that the change in his voice was nothing more than the harbinger of a hearty cold, one of the occupational hazards of traveling salesmen.

Throwing off the covers was perfectly simple: he only needed to puff himself up a bit and they fell off on their own. But doing more than that was difficult, especially because he was so strangely broad. He would normally have used his arms and hands to get up; now, he had only the many little legs which were continuously moving in every direction and which he could not seem to control. If he meant to bend one, it would be the first one to stretch itself out, if he finally succeeded in enforcing his will with one leg, all the rest of them worked furiously, as if liberated, in extreme, painful agitation. "You can't just lie here in bed doing nothing," Gregor said to himself.

At first he intended to get out of the bed with 10
the lower part of his body foremost, but this lower part, which he had moreover not yet seen and of which he could not form a proper mental image, proved too difficult to move. It went extremely slowly. When, nearly frantic, he finally gathered his strength and recklessly shoved himself forward, he misjudged the direction and violently struck the lower bed post. The burning pain he felt convinced him that the lower part of his body was at least at the moment the most sensitive part.

He afterwards attempted to get his upper body out of bed and carefully turned his head towards the edge of the bed. This he could do easily, and in spite of its bulk and weight, the mass of his body finally slowly followed the direction of his head. But when he held his head at last free of the bed, he became afraid to shift further in this direction, because if he ultimately let himself fall like that, it would be a miracle if his head were not injured. And now, of all times,

he could not afford to lose consciousness; he would rather remain in bed.

After continued effort, however, he found himself lying exactly as before, and heaved a sigh. He saw his little legs struggling against one another even more furiously, if that were possible, and he saw no way of introducing calm and order to this anarchy. At this point he repeated to himself that he could not possibly lie in bed any longer and that it would be most sensible to risk everything, even if there were only the smallest hope of thereby freeing himself from bed. At the same time, however, he kept reminding himself that calm deliberation was always better than rash decision-making. All the while he tried hard to focus on the view from the window, but unfortunately there was little encouragement or cheer to gain from the sight of the morning fog, which shrouded even the opposite side of the narrow street. "Already seven o'clock," he said to himself with the latest striking of the alarm clock, "already seven o'clock and still such fog." And he lay quiet a short while, breathing shallowly, as if he thought complete stillness might restore things to their true and natural state.

After a bit, however, he said to himself, "Before it strikes seven-fifteen, I must without fail be completely out of bed. For one thing, someone from the company will have come by then to inquire after me, because the office opens before seven." And he concentrated his efforts toward swinging his entire body out of the bed all at the same time. If he let himself fall out of bed in this manner, his head, which he would raise sharply during the fall, would presumably remain uninjured. His back seemed to be hard; nothing would happen to it in the fall onto the carpet. His greatest source of misgiving was anticipation of the loud crash that would follow, which would probably arouse anxiety, if not terror, beyond the doors. That would have to be risked, however.

When, by rocking back and forth, Gregor moved halfway off of the bed — the new method was more a game than an exertion — it occurred to him how simple everything would be if someone would come help him. Two strong people — he thought of his father and the servant girl — would be more than adequate. They would only have to shove their arms under his domed back, pry him up out of bed, prop up his bulk by crouching low, and then help him complete the turn over onto the floor, where hopefully his little legs would gain some sense of purpose. Quite apart from the fact that the doors were locked, though, should he really call for help? In spite of his predicament he couldn't suppress a smile at the thought.

He was already so far along that he could 15
hardly maintain his balance when he rocked forcefully. Very soon he would have to make a final decision, because in five minutes it would be seven-fifteen. Just then the front doorbell rang. "That's someone from the company," he said to himself and virtually froze, though his little legs only danced more hurriedly. Everything remained quiet for a moment. "They're not opening the door," Gregor said to himself, momentarily carried away by some absurd hope. But then, naturally, as always, the servant girl directed her firm step to the door and opened it. Gregor needed to hear only the first word of greeting from the visitor and he already knew who it was — the Deputy Director himself. Why was Gregor condemned to work at a company where the least infraction immediately attracted the greatest suspicion? Were all employees then without exception scoundrels; were there among them no loyal, devoted individuals who, when they had merely missed a few morning hours of service, would become so tormented by pangs of conscience that they would be frankly unable to leave their beds? Wouldn't it really have been enough to send an apprentice to inquire — if indeed this inquiry

were necessary at all? Did the Deputy Director himself have to come, thereby showing the entire innocent family that the investigation of this suspicious situation could only be entrusted to the Deputy Director himself? And more as a result of the agitation into which this line of thought transported Gregor, than as a result of a proper decision, he swung himself with all his might out of the bed. There was a loud thump, but no actual crash. The fall was muffled a bit by the carpet, and his back was more elastic than Gregor had thought — these things accounted for the fairly inconspicuous dull thump. He had failed only to raise his head carefully enough and had struck it. He twisted it back and forth and rubbed it into the carpet out of anger and pain.

"Something happened inside there," said the Deputy Director in the room to the left. Gregor tried to imagine something similar to what had happened to him today happening to the Deputy Director; it really was possible, after all. But as if in cruel response to this question the Deputy Director took a few decisive steps in the next room, making his patent leather boots creak. From the room to the right Gregor's sister whispered to inform him: "Gregor, the Deputy Director is here." "I know," said Gregor to himself; but he did not dare to raise his voice loud enough for his sister to hear.

"Gregor," his father now said from the room to the left, "the Deputy Director has come and inquires as to why you did not leave with the early morning train. We don't know what we should say to him. Furthermore, he wants to speak to you directly. So please open the door. He will surely have the goodness to excuse the disorder of your room." "Good morning, Mr. Samsa," the Deputy Director called out at the same time in a friendly manner. "He is not well," his mother said to the Deputy Director, while his father still spoke at the door, "he is not well, believe me, sir. Why would Gregor otherwise miss a train? The boy has nothing in his head but the company. I almost worry that he never goes out at night; he has been in the city eight days now, but he was at home every night. He sits with us at the table and quietly reads the newspaper or studies train schedules. Busying himself with woodworking is as far as he goes in the way of amusement. In the course of two, three evenings, for example, he cut himself a small frame; you would be astounded at how pretty it is. It's hanging in his room; you will see it right away, when Gregor opens up. I am happy, in any case, that you're here, Deputy Director. We could not have persuaded Gregor to open the door alone; he is so stubborn; and there's certainly something wrong with him, although he denied it this morning." "I'm coming right away," said Gregor slowly and carefully, while not moving at all, in order not to miss a word of the conversation. "Otherwise, dear woman, I can't explain it myself, either," said the Deputy Director. "Hopefully it's nothing serious. Though I must say, that we businessmen — either fortunately or unfortunately, as you will — must often ignore a trivial indisposition in the interest of business." "So can the Deputy Director come in to see you?" asked his impatient father, knocking again at the door. "No," said Gregor. In the room to the left there arose an awkward silence; in the room to the right, his sister began sobbing.

Why didn't his sister join the others? She had most likely just now arisen from bed and had not yet begun to get dressed. And why was she crying? Because he did not stand up and let the Deputy Director in; because he was in danger of losing his position and because the Director would then persecute his parents with the old demands? Those were unnecessary worries, for the time being. Gregor was still here and did not in the least contemplate leaving his family. At the moment he was lying on the carpet, and no one who was aware of his condition would seriously request that he let the

Deputy Director in. Gregor could not possibly be dismissed just for this minor breach of politeness; he could easily find a suitable excuse later. And it seemed to Gregor far more reasonable to leave him in peace now, instead of disturbing him with tears and entreaties. But it was the uncertainty of it all that distressed the others and so excused their behavior.

"Mr. Samsa," the Deputy Director now called in a raised voice, "what's the matter? You barricade yourself there in your room, answer merely with yes and no, burden your parents with profound, unnecessary worries and — this only mentioned incidentally — neglect your business responsibilities in an unheard-of way. I speak here in the name of your parents and your Director and earnestly request of you an immediate, clear explanation. I am amazed; I am amazed. I thought I knew you as a quiet, reasonable person, and now you suddenly begin to exhibit extraordinary capriciousness. The Director told me early this morning of a possible explanation for your dereliction — it related to the cash account recently entrusted to you — but I actually almost gave him my word of honor that this explanation could not be accurate. Now, however, I see your incomprehensible stubbornness here, and I lose any desire to vouch for you in the least. And your position is not the most secure. I originally had the intention of saying all of this just between the two of us, but since you force me to waste my time here needlessly, I don't know why your parents should not also hear it. Your performance recently has been very unsatisfying. It is not the time of the year, of course, to do extraordinary business, we recognize that; but there is no time of year in which to do *no* business, Mr. Samsa — there cannot be."

"But, sir," called out Gregor, beside himself, 20
forgetting everything else in his agitation, "I'll open up immediately, this instant. A mild indisposition — an attack of dizziness — has kept me from getting up. I'm still lying in bed. I'm completely recovered now, though. I'm climbing out of bed right now. Just one moment of patience! I thought things were not quite back to normal yet. But I'm already well again. How it can suddenly come over a person! I was fine yesterday evening, my parents know that, or perhaps I should say that yesterday evening I had a slight premonition of it. It must have been easy to see in me. Why didn't I report it to the office yesterday! But one always thinks that one can ride out illness without having to stay home. Sir! Spare my parents! There is no basis for all the reproaches you've made against me; no one said anything about them to me before now. Perhaps you haven't seen the latest orders that I sent in. In any case, I will be starting my trip on the eight o'clock train. These few hours of rest have strengthened me. Don't let me hold you up, though, sir; I'll soon be in the office myself, and please have the goodness to say so, and to send my greetings to the Director."

And while Gregor hurriedly blurted all this out, hardly knowing what he said, he moved effortlessly closer to the chest, thanks to the practice he had had in bed, and attempted to raise himself against it to an upright position. He actually wanted to open the door, actually wanted to let them see him and to speak with the Deputy Director. He was eager to know what they all would say to him when they finally saw him, after so much urging. Would they be afraid? If so, Gregor would be absolved of responsibility and could relax. If they took it all in stride, however, then, too, he would have no cause for worry, and he really could be at the train station at eight, if he hurried. At first he simply slid a few times down the side of the slippery chest; finally, however, he gave himself one last swing and stood upright. He ignored the pain in his lower body, despite the fact that it burned. Now he let himself fall against the back of a nearby chair and held tight to its sides with his legs. This helped him regain his self-control, and he stayed quiet, so that he could hear the Deputy Director speak.

GREG WOOD / AFP / Getty Images

The Metamorphosis has been adapted many times, as both play and opera. In this photograph from a stage production, the characters, including Gregor, are all dressed in everyday clothing. **Why do you think this production does not represent Gregor's physical transformation? How do you think the viewer's experience of Gregor's transformation is affected by the fact that the actor who plays him is still clearly human?**

"Did you understand one word?" the Deputy Director asked his parents. "Surely he's making fun of us?" "For God's sake," cried his mother in the midst of tears, "he might be seriously ill, and we're all plaguing him. Grete! Grete!" she then screamed. "Mother?" called his sister from the other side. They were communicating through Gregor's room. "You must go fetch the doctor this minute. Gregor is ill. Quickly, to the doctor. Did you hear Gregor speak just now?" "That was the voice of an animal," said the Deputy Director, noticeably quiet, by contrast with the screaming of his mother. "Anna! Anna!" called his father towards the kitchen, clapping his hands, "Get a locksmith immediately!" And the two girls ran, their skirts rustling, through the foyer — how had his sister gotten dressed so quickly? — and flung the apartment door open. There was no noise of the door slamming; they had probably left it open, as was usual in apartments where some great misfortune had occurred.

Gregor had become much calmer, however. It was true that they didn't understand his speech, but it sounded clear enough to him, clearer than previously, perhaps because his ear had adjusted to it. But they did still believe that something was wrong with him, and they were prepared to help him. He was pleased by the confidence and certainty with which the first arrangements had been made. He felt drawn once again into the circle of humanity and expected great things from both the doctor and the locksmith, without really making a distinction between them. In order to develop the clearest possible voice for the decisive discussions to come, he coughed a bit, although he tried to do this in a muted fashion, because this, too, might sound very different from a human cough — he no longer trusted himself to judge. It had now fallen completely silent in the next room. His parents might have been sitting at the table, whispering with the Deputy Director, or

perhaps they were all pressed against the door, listening.

Using the chair, Gregor slowly shoved himself forward, and then let go, throwing himself against the door, and holding himself upright against it. The balls of his feet had some sticky substance on them. He took a moment to recover from the exertion. Then he applied himself to turning the key in the lock. Unfortunately, it seemed as if he had no real teeth — what then could he grip the key with? — but his jaws, on the other hand, were powerful. With their help he started to turn the key. He paid no attention to the fact that he obviously did some harm to himself in the process — a brown discharge came out from his mouth, flowing over the key and dripping on the floor. "Listen now," said the Deputy Director in the next room, "he's turning the key." That encouraged Gregor greatly, but all of them should have cheered him on, his father and mother, too: "Come on, Gregor," they should have called, "keep at it, keep working the lock!" And imagining that all his efforts were being watched with rapt attention, he recklessly bit down on the key with all his might. He danced around the lock, following the key as it turned; holding himself upright entirely with his mouth, he either pulled up on the key or forced it down with the full weight of his body, as necessary. The crisp click of the lock finally snapping back elated him. Breathing a sigh of relief he said to himself, "I didn't even need the locksmith," and he laid his head on the door handle, in order to open the door.

Because he had to open the door in this way, 25
he was not yet visible even when it was opened wide. If he didn't want to fall flat on his back just before his entrance into the next room, he would first have to slowly make his way around the open panel of the double door. He was still busy with this difficult maneuver and had not yet had a moment to think of the others, when he heard the Deputy Director force out a loud "Oh!" It sounded like a gust of wind. Now he could also see the Deputy, who was nearest the door — he pressed his hand to his open mouth and slowly shrank back, as if an invisible, irresistible force drove him. His mother — who stood, despite the presence of the Deputy Director, with her hair still loose, and sticking up in parts from her night's sleep — first looked at his father with her hands clasped; then she walked two steps towards Gregor and sank to the ground in the midst of her billowing skirts, her face completely hidden, sunk upon her breast. His father balled his fist with a fierce expression, as if he wanted to knock Gregor back into his room; then he looked uncertainly around the living room, covered his eyes with his hands, and sobbed so that his powerful chest shook.

Gregor had not yet entered the outer room; instead, he leaned from within against the door panel that was still fastened, so that only half of his body and his head, craned to one side in order to see them, were visible. It had become much brighter outside in the meantime: one could clearly see a section of the endless, gray-black building — it was a hospital — that stood across the street, its severe, uniform windows breaking up its facade. The rain still fell, but only in large, singly visible and singly plummeting drops. The table teemed with breakfast dishes; his father considered breakfast the most important meal of the day, and he protracted it for hours reading various periodicals. On the wall just opposite hung a photograph of Gregor from his military days, which showed him dressed as a lieutenant, with a carefree smile, his hand on his dagger, his bearing and his uniform commanding respect. The door to the foyer was open, and because the door to the apartment was open as well, one could see the outer hall and the top of the staircase leading downwards.

"Now," said Gregor — and he was well aware that he was the only one remaining calm — "I will just get dressed, pack my samples up, and be off. Will you all allow me to go? Deputy

Director, you see that I'm not obstinate and that I want to work. Traveling is demanding, but I couldn't live without it. Where do you intend to go now, Deputy Director? To the office? Yes? Will you report everything accurately? A person might be unable to work for a time, but it is precisely then that one must consider his past accomplishments and keep in mind that once the hindrance is past, he will certainly work even harder and more efficiently. I owe a great deal to the Director — you know that only too well. On the other hand, I have the care of my parents and sister. I'm in a fix, but I'll work my way out again. But please don't make it more difficult for me than it already is. Take my part in the office! I know the traveling salesmen aren't popular. People think we earn a huge amount of money and lead grand lives. People just don't have any particular reason to think this prejudice through carefully. You, however, Deputy Director, you have a better perspective on how things work than most of the staff — I might say, confidentially, a better perspective than even the Director himself, who, in his capacity as owner, can easily be misled in his judgment about an employee. You know very well that the traveling salesman, because he is away from the office the better part of the year, easily falls victim to gossip, to chance misfortune, and groundless complaints. It's impossible for him to defend himself against these complaints, as he ordinarily learns nothing of them; it's only when he comes home at the end of a trip completely exhausted that he feels the terrible consequences, whose origins he can't divine, in his very body. Deputy Director, don't leave without saying one word that shows me that you agree with me at least in part!"

But the Deputy Director had turned away at Gregor's first words, and was staring back at Gregor over one twitching shoulder, his mouth agape. During Gregor's speech he had not stood still for a moment, but, never taking his eyes off of Gregor, moved steadily but surreptitiously towards the door, as if there were some secret prohibition against leaving the room. He had already reached the foyer, and judging by the sudden movement with which he pulled his foot out of the room at his last step, one would have thought his sole was on fire. Once in the foyer, he stretched his hand out towards the staircase as if divine deliverance awaited him there.

Gregor realized that the Deputy Director could under no circumstances be allowed to leave this way, if his position at the company were not to be endangered. His parents didn't understand this as well as he did. They had over the years persuaded themselves that he was guaranteed permanent employment in the company, and besides, they had so much to do in dealing with their own distress at the moment, that their foresight had vanished. But Gregor had this foresight. The Deputy Director must be detained, calmed, persuaded, and finally won over — the future of Gregor and his family depended on it. If only his sister were here! She was clever: she was already crying when Gregor was still calmly lying on his back. And the Deputy Director, that ladies' man, would surely have let her sway him: she would have closed the apartment door and talked him out of his fear in the foyer. But his sister was not there, so Gregor would have to handle it himself. And without thinking about the fact that he had no idea yet how well he could move, without thinking that his speech was possibly — well, very probably — incomprehensible, he let go of the door panel, forcing himself through the opening, and headed for the Deputy Director, who was already at the landing in the hall and hugging himself in a comical manner. With a small cry, scrambling in vain for something to hold on to, Gregor immediately fell down onto his many little legs. This had hardly happened, when for the first time that morning he felt a sense of physical well-being. His little legs had solid ground beneath them; they obeyed him completely, as he noted to his delight. They even strove to carry him where he wanted to go.

Suddenly, he believed that the ultimate relief of all his suffering was at hand. But at that moment, as he lay on the floor trembling with suppressed energy, close to his mother and directly opposite her, she sprang up — she who had seemed so lost in thought — with her arms outstretched, her fingers splayed, and cried out: "Help, for God's sake, help!" She kept her head turned towards him, as if she wanted to be able to see him better, but, following a contradictory impulse, she ran heedlessly backwards, forgetting that the table full of dishes lay behind her. She quickly sat down when she reached it, as if absent-mindedly, seeming not to notice that next to her the coffeepot had been knocked over and coffee was streaming freely out onto the carpet.

"Mother, Mother," Gregor said softly, and looked up at her. The Deputy Director vanished from his mind momentarily, and he couldn't stop himself from snapping his jaws at the empty air several times at the sight of the flowing coffee. His mother began screaming again over this, fled from the table, and fell into the arms of his father, who was hurrying towards her. But Gregor had no time then for his parents. The Deputy Director was already on the stairs. His chin on the railing, he looked back one last time. Gregor took a running start, in order to have the best chance of catching up to him. The Deputy Director must have sensed something, as he sprang down several steps and then disappeared. "Ahh!" he screamed; it echoed throughout the entire stairwell.

Unfortunately, the flight of the Deputy Director seemed to have completely unhinged his father, who up until then had been relatively self-controlled. Instead of running after the Deputy Director or at least not restraining Gregor from pursuing him, with his right hand he grabbed the walking stick that the Deputy Director had left behind on an armchair together with his hat and coat; with his left hand he picked up a large newspaper from the table; then, stamping his feet, he began to drive Gregor back into his room by swatting at him with the stick and the newspaper. None of Gregor's pleas helped — none of his pleas were understood. The more submissively he bowed his head, the more vigorously his father stamped his feet. Across the room, despite the cool weather, his mother had thrown open a window and, leaning far out of the window, pressed her face into her hands. Between the street and the stairwell there arose a strong cross-draft: the window curtains flew up; the newspapers on the table rustled, and a few pages fluttered to the floor. His father drove him back mercilessly, spitting out hissing noises like a wild beast. Gregor, however, still was unpracticed in moving backwards, so he went very slowly. If he had only been allowed time to turn around, he would have gone immediately back into his room, but he was afraid of making his father impatient. At every moment the stick in his father's hand threatened to deal him a fatal blow to his back or head. Finally, however, Gregor found he had no choice, as he noted with terror that he seemed unable to keep going in the right direction when he moved backwards. He therefore began, with frequent side-glances at his father, to turn around as quickly as he could, which was actually very slowly. His father might have understood his good intentions, because he did not disturb him while he was doing this; in fact, he actually directed him here and there from a distance with the point of his stick. If only there weren't this unbearable hissing from his father! It unnerved Gregor completely. He was already almost completely turned around when, listening to his hissing, he made a mistake and turned a bit in the wrong direction. When he was finally, fortunately, headfirst at the opening of the door, it appeared that his body was too wide to go through without further ado. In his present state of mind it was naturally far from occurring to his father to open the other door panel in order to make a wide enough passageway for Gregor. He was obsessed merely with getting

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Gregor into his room as quickly as possible. He would never have allowed the preparations necessary for Gregor to raise himself up and possibly go through the door that way. Instead, making a great deal of noise, he drove Gregor forward as if there were no obstacle before him. The noise coming from behind Gregor didn't sound any longer like the voice of his father. It was clearly no laughing matter, so Gregor forced himself — happen what would — through the door. One side of his body was hoisted upwards. He lay crookedly in the doorway. One of his flanks was rubbed raw, and on the white door ugly smears remained behind. He was soon stuck fast, and couldn't move at all anymore. His little legs hung twitching on one side, and those on the other side were pressed painfully against the floor. Then his father liberated him with a powerful shove from behind, and he flew, bleeding heavily, a long way into his room. The door was slammed shut with the stick, and then it was finally quiet.

II

It was already twilight when Gregor awoke from a deep, dreamless sleep. He would not have arisen much later even without having been disturbed, for he felt well rested and no longer sleepy, but it seemed to him that he had been awakened by the sounds of a fleeting footstep and of the door to the foyer carefully being shut. The glare from the electric street lamp outside lay palely here and there on the ceiling of his room and on the upper surfaces of the furniture, but down by Gregor it was dark. He shoved himself slowly towards the door, awkwardly groping with the feelers he had just then come to appreciate, in order to see what had happened there. His left side seemed to be a single, long, unpleasantly taut scar, and he had to positively limp on his row of legs. One leg had been seriously injured during the events of the morning: it dragged limply behind him.

It was only when he was at the door that he realized what had actually lured him there: it was the smell of something edible. Standing there was a basin filled with fresh milk, swimming with small pieces of white bread. He could almost have laughed for joy, for he was even hungrier than he had been that morning. He immediately dunked his head in the milk nearly up to his eyes. But he soon pulled back, disappointed. It wasn't only that his tender left side made it hard for him to eat — for it seemed he was able to eat only if his entire panting body cooperated — it was rather that the milk, which had always been his favorite drink, and which his sister certainly placed here for that reason, didn't taste good to him at all. He turned away from the basin with something like revulsion and crept back into the middle of the room.

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The gas lamps had been turned on in the living room, as Gregor saw through the crack in the door. Whereas ordinarily at this hour his father would read the afternoon paper out loud to his mother and sometimes to his sister, now there wasn't a sound. Perhaps the reading, which his sister had frequently told him and wrote him about, had lately dropped out of their routine. It was completely quiet, though the apartment was certainly not empty. "What a quiet life the family leads," Gregor said to himself and felt great pride, as he stared into the darkness before him, that he had been able to provide his parents and his sister with such a life, in such a nice apartment. But what if terror now drove away all quiet, all prosperity, all contentment? Rather than surrender to such thoughts, Gregor preferred to move about, so he crawled back and forth in the room.

Once during the long evening one of the side doors and later the other was opened a crack and then hastily shut again. Someone had probably needed to come in, but had then thought better of it. Gregor now stopped directly in front of the door to the living room, determined somehow to get the hesitant visitor to come in,

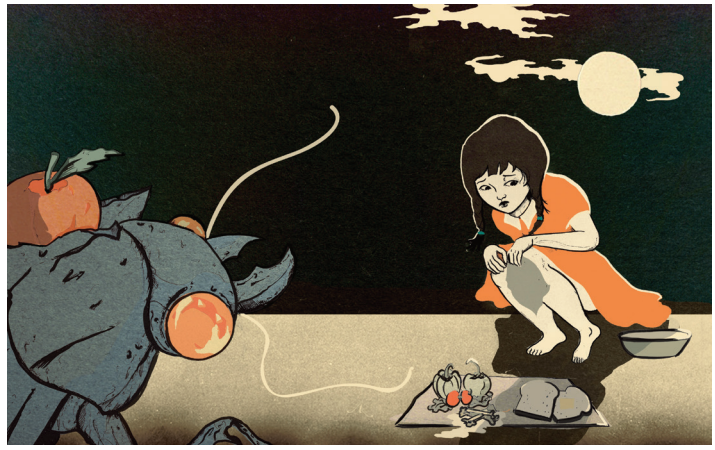
or at least to find out who it was, but the doors were not opened again and Gregor waited in vain. Early on, when the doors were locked, everyone had wanted to come in; now, when he had unlocked one door and the others had clearly been unlocked during the day, no one came, and the keys had been moved to the outside.

It was late at night before the light in the living room was turned out, and it was now clear that his parents and sister had been awake until then, for all three could clearly be heard departing on tiptoes. Now surely no one would come to see Gregor until morning; he therefore had quite a while in which to consider undisturbed how he should newly arrange his life. But he was uneasy lying flat on the ground in the high-ceilinged open room. He did not know why this should be, for he had lived in the room for five years already. Half unconsciously, and not without some shame, he scurried under the sofa where, despite the fact that his back was a bit crushed and he could no longer lift his head, he immediately felt more comfortable, regretting only that his body was too broad to fit completely underneath.

He remained there the entire night. He spent part of it in a light sleep, out of which hunger kept jolting him awake, and part of it awake, consumed by worries and by vague hopes that all led to the same conclusion: that for the time being he should keep calm and, by exercising patience and the greatest consideration for his family, try to make bearable the unpleasantness that he would in his present condition inevitably cause them.

Early the next morning — it was nearly still night — Gregor had a chance to test the firmness of his resolve, for his sister, already half-dressed, opened the door leading from the foyer and looked tensely inside. She couldn't find him right away, but when she noticed him under the sofa — God, he had to be someplace, he couldn't have just flown away — she was so shocked that without being able to stop herself she slammed the door shut again. But as if she regretted her behavior, she opened the door again immediately, and came inside on tiptoe, as if she were in the presence of someone severely ill, or even a complete stranger. Gregor shoved his head forward just to the edge of the sofa and watched her. He wondered whether she would notice that he had left the milk standing, though not from lack of hunger, and whether she would bring him some other food that suited him better. If she didn't do it on her own, he would rather starve than make her aware of it, although he felt a strong urge to shoot out from beneath the sofa, throw himself at her feet, and beg her for something good to eat. But his sister, with some amazement, right away noticed the still full basin: only a bit of milk had been spilled around its edges. She picked it up immediately, though with a rag, not with her bare hands, and took it away. Gregor was extremely curious to see what she would bring as a replacement and thought a great deal about it. He could never have guessed, however, what his sister in her goodness actually did. In order to test his preferences, she brought him an entire assortment of foods spread out on an old newspaper. There were old, half-rotten vegetables; bones from last night's meal, covered with congealed white sauce; a few raisins and almonds; a cheese that Gregor had declared inedible two days before; a piece of dry bread, a piece of bread smeared with butter, and a piece with butter and salt. Beside this she placed the basin that seemed now to be designated permanently for Gregor, which she had filled with water. And out of tact, because she knew Gregor would not eat in front of her, she departed hastily, even going so far as to turn the key in the lock, just so that Gregor would know that he could make himself as comfortable as he wanted. Gregor's legs quivered, now that the meal lay waiting. His wounds must moreover have completely healed. He felt no impairment now, and was astonished at this, thinking of how he had cut himself very slightly with a knife more than a month ago and how the wound

How does this work, by artist Alison Czinkota, characterize Gregor's sister Grete as she offers him food?



Alison Czinkota

had still hurt him considerably the day before yesterday. "Am I less sensitive than before?" he wondered, and sucked greedily at the cheese, to which he had found himself urgently drawn, before everything else. In rapid succession, amidst tears of joy, he devoured the cheese, the vegetables, and the sauce. He didn't like the taste of the fresh foods, however — he couldn't even bear their smell, and dragged the foods that he wanted to eat a bit farther away. He had long since finished everything and lay lazily in the same spot when his sister slowly turned the key in the lock, as a sign that he should withdraw. That jolted him awake immediately, though he was almost dozing, and he hurried back under the sofa. But it took great self-control for him to remain under the sofa even for the brief time that his sister was in the room, for his body had swelled a bit with the ample meal, and he could hardly breathe in the narrow space. Half-suffocating, he looked out with slightly bulging eyes as his sister, who noticed nothing, swept up with a broom not just the remainder of the food Gregor had eaten, but also the food that he had not even touched, as if this were no longer useable. She put it all in a container that she closed with a wooden lid, and then carried everything out. She had hardly turned around when Gregor pulled himself out from under the sofa and exhaled.

In this way Gregor now received his daily meals: the first in the morning, while his parents and the servant girl still slept, and the second after the common midday meal, for his parents slept a bit afterwards, and his sister sent the serving girl away on one errand or another. It was not that the others wanted him to starve, but experiencing his meals at secondhand might have been all they could bear; or perhaps his sister simply wanted to spare them even this minor source of sorrow, since they were already suffering enough.

With what kinds of excuses they had managed 40
to get the doctor and the locksmith out of the apartment the first morning, Gregor didn't manage to find out. Because no one could understand him, it didn't occur to anyone — not even to his sister — that he could understand them, so he had to content himself, when his sister was in his room, with listening to her occasional sighs and appeals to the saints. It was only later, when she had gotten used to things a bit — getting used to them completely was out of the question, of course — that Gregor sometimes seized on a remark that was meant in a friendly way or that could be taken that way. "Today he liked it," she said, if he had made a real dent in the meal, while in the contrary case, which occurred ever more frequently of late, she used to say almost sadly: "Everything untouched again."

Though Gregor could not learn any news directly, he overheard some from the rooms next door. The moment he heard voices, he immediately ran to the door and pressed his entire body up against it. Especially in the early days, there was no conversation that did not somehow, if only indirectly, relate to him. For two days there were consultations at every meal about what they should do; between meals, too, they discussed the same thing. There were always at least two family members at home, because no one wanted to remain home alone, and they couldn't under any circumstances all leave the apartment at the same time. On the very first day the girl who cooked for them had begged his mother on bended knee — it wasn't exactly clear what and how much she knew of what had happened — to dismiss her. As she departed fifteen minutes later, she tearfully thanked them for her dismissal, as if for the greatest favor that had ever been done her, and swore a terrible oath, without anyone having asked her to do so, not to betray the least of what she knew to anyone.

Now his sister had to do the cooking, together with his mother. This didn't take much effort, however, because they ate practically nothing. Gregor heard them again and again urge each other to eat and receive no other answer than "Thanks, I've had enough," or something similar. It seemed they didn't drink anything, either. His sister often asked his father if he would like a beer, cheerfully offering to get it herself. When his father said nothing, she offered to send the porter for it, in case he didn't want to trouble her. When his father finally uttered a firm "No," the subject was dropped.

In the course of the first few days his father explained their entire financial situation and their prospects to his mother and to his sister. Now and then he stood up from the table and took various documents and notebooks out of the small safe that he had rescued from the bankruptcy of his business five years before. He could be heard opening the complicated lock and closing it again after removing what he sought. His father's explanations contained the first heartening news that Gregor had heard since his imprisonment. He had been under the impression that his father had absolutely nothing left over from his business. As least, he had said nothing to the contrary, and Gregor had certainly never asked him about it. Gregor's concern at the time of the bankruptcy had been to arrange everything so that the family could forget as soon as possible the financial misfortune that had brought them to a state of complete despair. And so he had begun to work with pronounced fervor. Practically overnight he was elevated from a minor clerk into a traveling salesman, which naturally gave him completely different financial prospects. His successes at work translated directly into cash that he could lay on the table at home before his astonished and pleased family. Those had been fine times, but they had never recurred, at least not with the same warm feelings, although Gregor later earned so much money that he was in a position to support the entire family, and he did so. They simply got used to it — the family, as well as Gregor. They gratefully accepted his money, and he gladly offered it, but that special warmth did not reappear. Only his sister remained close to Gregor. Because she loved music very much, unlike Gregor, and could play the violin movingly, he secretly planned to send her to the conservatory next year, despite the great cost, which would have to be made up somehow. The conservatory came up often in conversations with his sister during Gregor's brief stays in the city, but only as a beautiful dream whose realization was unthinkable. His parents didn't even like to hear them utter those innocent musings. But Gregor had given it a good deal of thought and intended to announce his decision with due ceremony on Christmas Eve.

These thoughts, completely futile in his present situation, went through his head while he clung to the door and listened. Sometimes, from sheer exhaustion, he could listen no more and

would let his head fall against the door, but then immediately catch himself, for even the faint noise that he made in doing so was heard next door and caused them all to fall silent. "What's he doing now?" said his father after a pause, obviously turned towards the door. Only then was the interrupted conversation gradually taken up again.

Gregor now learned — for his father tended 45
to repeat himself often in his explanations, partly because he had not concerned himself with these matters for a long while, and partly, too, because his mother didn't immediately understand everything the first time — that despite all their misfortunes, a certain sum, though a very small one, was left over from the old days. The untouched interest on the sum had moreover in the meantime allowed it to grow a bit. Besides this, the money that Gregor had brought home every month — he had only kept a few florins for himself — had not been completely exhausted and had accumulated into a small amount of capital. Gregor, behind the door, nodded eagerly, overjoyed at this unexpected foresight and thriftiness. It occurred to him that he might have used that extra money to further pay down the debt his father owed the Director, bringing closer the day that he could quit his job, but the way his father had arranged things was no doubt better.

The sum that had been saved was not, however, large enough to allow his family to live off of the interest. It would have been enough to support them for a year, or at most two years, but no longer. The sum really shouldn't be touched: it should be set aside for emergencies. To live, money would have to be earned. His father was a healthy but old man, who had not worked now for five years and couldn't in any case take on too much. During these five years, which had been the first free time of his hardworking but unsuccessful life, he had put on a great deal of weight and had become downright sluggish. But was his elderly mother supposed to earn money now — his mother, who suffered from asthma, for whom even a stroll through the apartment was considerable exertion, and who spent every other day on the sofa by the open window, gasping for breath? Or his sister, who at seventeen was still a child, and whose lifestyle up to that point had consisted of dressing herself neatly, sleeping late, helping out in the household, taking part in a few modest pleasures, and above all playing the violin? Whenever the conversation turned towards the necessity of earning money, Gregor left the door and threw himself on the leather sofa that stood nearby, for he burned with shame and sorrow.

Often he lay there the long night through, though he was unable to sleep for a moment and just scratched for hours at the leather. Or he would go to great pains to shove an armchair to the window, then crawl up to the windowsill and, bolstered by the armchair, lean against the window. He did so only in some kind of nostalgia for the feeling of freedom he had previously found in looking out the window, for the fact was that every day he saw things that were even a short distance away less and less clearly. He could no longer see the hospital that lay across the way, whose all too massive prospect he had earlier cursed. If he had not known very well that he lived in the quiet, but distinctly urban Charlotte Street, he could have believed that he looked out of his window into a desert in which the gray sky and the gray earth merged indistinguishably. His alert sister only had to see the armchair standing by the window twice before she began to shove the chair precisely back to the spot by the window after she straightened up the room. She even left the inner casement open from then on.

If Gregor had been able to speak to his sister and thank her for everything she had to do for him, he would have been able to bear her assistance more easily; as it was, however, it caused him some pain. His sister tried to hide the awkwardness of the whole thing as much as possible, and the longer it went on, the better

she succeeded, but Gregor felt everything more acutely as time went on. Even her entrance was terrible for him. She had hardly entered, when, without even taking the time to shut the doors, though she otherwise took such pains to spare everyone the sight of Gregor's room, she ran to the window and hastily flung it open, as if she were suffocating. Then she remained for a time by the window, cold as it still was, and breathed deeply. With this running and commotion she alarmed Gregor twice daily. He trembled under the sofa the entire time and yet he knew very well that she would gladly have spared him, if only it had been possible to stay in a room where Gregor was with the windows closed.

Once — one month had already passed since Gregor's transformation, and there was no longer any reason for his sister to be astonished by his appearance — she came a bit earlier than usual and encountered Gregor as he was staring out the window, motionless and perfectly positioned to frighten someone. Gregor would not have been surprised if she had not come in, since his position hindered her from immediately opening the window, but she not only refrained from coming in, she actually turned around and locked the door. A stranger would have thought that Gregor had lain in wait for her and tried to bite her. Gregor naturally hid himself immediately under the sofa, but he had to wait until midday for her return, and she seemed then more agitated than usual. He realized from this that his appearance was still unbearable to her and that it would remain so — that she had to steel herself to keep from running at the sight of even the small portion of his body that jutted out from beneath the sofa. In order to spare her the sight, one day he dragged a sheet onto the sofa — it took him four hours to do so — and arranged it in such a way that he was completely covered. His sister could not have seen him even if she bent down. If the sheet had not been necessary, in her opinion, she could have removed it, for it obviously couldn't be pleasant for Gregor to block himself off so completely. But she left the sheet where it was, and Gregor thought he even noticed a grateful glance when he once carefully lifted the sheet with his head in order to see how his sister liked the new arrangement.

In the first two weeks his parents could not bring themselves to come in to see him, and he often heard them praise his sister's current industry, whereas they had previously complained a great deal about her, as she had then seemed to them a rather idle girl. In those early days, both his father and his mother often waited in front of Gregor's room while his sister straightened up, and as soon as she came out, she had to tell them precisely what it looked like in the room, what Gregor had eaten, how he had behaved, and whether there were perhaps any slight improvement in his condition. His mother also wanted to visit Gregor early on, but his father and sister dissuaded her with sound reasons to which Gregor listened very attentively, and which he completely supported. Later, however, she had to be restrained with force. When she cried out, "Let me in to see Gregor; he's my poor son! Don't you understand that I must go to him?" Gregor thought that it might be good if his mother did come in — not every day, of course, but perhaps once a week. After all, she knew how to do things much better than his sister, who, despite her courage, was still only a child, and who likely took on such a heavy burden only out of childish thoughtlessness.

Gregor's wish to see his mother was soon fulfilled. During the day, for his parents' sake, Gregor did not want to show himself at the window, but he did not have much room to crawl in the few square meters of floor space. It was hard enough for him to bear lying quietly during the night, and eating soon gave him not the least bit of pleasure, so in order to distract himself, he had adopted the habit of crawling across the walls and ceiling. He especially liked

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hanging upside down from the ceiling. It was completely different from lying on the floor: he could breathe more freely; his entire body swayed gently; and in the nearly happy distraction in which he found himself above, it sometimes happened that he unexpectedly let himself fall and crashed to the ground. But these days he had better control of his body, so he did not hurt himself even in a great fall. His sister immediately noticed the new amusement that Gregor had found for himself — he left a trace of stickiness behind him here and there while crawling — and so she got it in her head to allow him to crawl to his utmost by removing the furniture that hindered it, especially the chest of drawers and desk. She was not capable of doing this herself, however. She didn't dare ask her father for help. The servant girl would certainly not help her: this roughly sixteen-year-old girl had stuck it out quite bravely since the dismissal of the former cook, but she had asked for the privilege of keeping the kitchen door always locked and only having to open it when specifically asked. So his sister had no choice but to enlist her mother one time when her father was absent. With cries of great joy his mother approached, but fell silent at the door of Gregor's room. His sister checked first, of course, to see that the room was in order; only then did she let her mother enter. In great haste, Gregor pulled the sheet lower and gathered more material around him. It looked like a sheet had merely been carelessly thrown over the sofa. Gregor also refrained from spying out from under the sheet. He deprived himself of the sight of his mother and took his pleasure entirely from the fact that she had come. "Come on, you can't see him," said his sister, and she apparently led her mother in by the hand. Gregor then heard the two frail women shove the heavy old chest of drawers from its place. His sister reserved the greatest part of the labor for herself, ignoring the warnings of her mother, who feared that she would overexert herself. It took a very long time. After fifteen minutes of work, his mother said that they should just leave the chest where it was, first, because it was too heavy — they wouldn't be finished before his father returned, and so would end up leaving the chest in the middle of the room, where it would block Gregor at every turn — and second, because it was not at all certain that they were doing Gregor a favor by removing the furniture. It seemed to her rather the opposite: the sight of the empty wall oppressed her heart. Why should Gregor not feel the same way? He had been used to the room's furniture for so long, that he would surely feel lost in an empty room. "And isn't it so," concluded his mother very softly — almost whispering, as if she wanted to keep Gregor, of whose precise whereabouts she wasn't certain, from hearing even the sound of her voice, for she was convinced that he could not understand the words — "isn't it so, that by removing the furniture we seem to be saying that we give up all hope of his recovery, and abandon him absolutely? I think it would be best if we left the room in exactly the same condition it was in before, so that when Gregor returns to us, he'll find

John Klossner The New Yorker Collection/ The Cartoon Bank

How does the cartoonist suggest that *The Metamorphosis* has become part of our popular culture — perhaps even for those who haven't read the novella?

everything unchanged, and so more easily forget what's happened in the meantime."

In listening to his mother's words, Gregor realized that the lack of any direct human communication over the course of the past two months, together with the monotonous life he led in the midst of the family, must have deranged his mind; otherwise he couldn't explain why he had earnestly desired that his room be emptied. Did he really want to let them transform the warm room, comfortably outfitted with inherited furnishings, into a cave? Granted, he would be able to crawl undisturbed in all directions, but he would at the same time forget, quickly and completely, his human past. He was already close to forgetting it, but his mother's voice, so long unheard, had roused him. Nothing should be removed; everything had to stay. He could not afford to lose the good influence the furniture had on his condition. If the furniture hindered him from carrying on his mindless crawling about, that was no drawback, it was rather a great advantage.

But his sister was unfortunately of a different opinion. She had become accustomed, not completely without justification, to playing the expert when it came to discussing anything that concerned Gregor with her parents. And so her mother's advice now led her to insist on the removal not only of the chest and the desk, which was all she had first intended, but of all of the furniture, with the exception of the indispensable sofa. Of course, it was not just childish stubbornness and the hard-won self-confidence she had recently and unexpectedly acquired that determined her on this course: she had actually observed that Gregor needed a great deal of room to crawl around in, and that he did not use the furniture at all, as far as she could see. It might also have been the romantic nature of girls of her age, which sought some outlet at every opportunity, and made her want Gregor's situation to be even more terrifying, so that she could do even more than before to help him. For in a space in which Gregor, completely alone, ruled the empty walls, no person but Grete would dare to enter.

And so she did not allow herself to be swayed by her mother, who faltered from sheer uneasiness at being in the room, soon fell silent, and finally helped his sister as much as she was able in shoving the chest out of the room. Gregor could spare the chest if he must, but the desk had to stay. The women had hardly left the room with the chest, pushing at it and gasping for air, when Gregor stuck his head out from under the sofa, in order to see where he could intervene, as carefully and as considerately as possible. But unfortunately it was his mother who returned first, while Grete in the next room gripped the chest and rocked it back and forth alone, without, naturally, being able to move it from its spot. His mother was not, however, used to the sight of Gregor — he might have made her sick — so Gregor, alarmed, rushed back to the opposite end of the sofa. He could not, however, prevent the sheet from moving a bit at the front. That was enough to put his mother on the alert. She froze, stood still a moment, and then returned to Grete.

Though Gregor kept telling himself that nothing extraordinary was happening — a few pieces of furniture were merely being moved around — he soon realized that this continual back and forth on the part of the women, their soft calls to one another, and the scraping of the furniture on the floor affected him like the greatest of commotions closing in on him from all sides. However closely he drew in his head and legs and however firmly he pressed his body to the floor, he realized he couldn't stand it much longer. They were emptying out his room; they were taking from him everything that he held dear. They had carried out the chest which held his fret saw and other tools; they were already working free the desk from the grooves it had worn into the floor — the desk at which he had written his exercises as a student at trade school,

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at secondary school, and even at primary school. At this point he did not have the patience to contemplate the women's good intentions, the existence of which he had at any rate almost forgotten. Exhausted, they worked now in complete silence, and only the heavy tread of their feet could be heard.

And so he burst forth from under the sofa — the women were just leaning against the desk in the next room, in order to catch their breath — though he changed the direction of his charge four times, for he really did not know what to save first. On one otherwise empty wall he distinctly saw the picture of the woman dressed entirely in furs. He crept hurriedly up to it and pressed himself against the glass, which held him fast and soothed his hot belly. At least no one could take away this picture, which Gregor now completely covered with his body. He turned his head towards the door of the living room in order to observe the women on their return.

They weren't allowing themselves much rest and so came back directly. Grete had put her arm around her mother and seemed practically to carry her. "Well, what should we take now?" said Grete and looked around. Then her glance met Gregor's as he clung to the wall. She maintained her composure — surely only due to her mother's presence — bent her face to her mother, in order to keep her from looking around, and said hastily, a tremor in her voice, "Come, let's go back in the living room for a moment." Grete's intention was clear to Gregor: she wanted to bring her mother to safety and then chase him down off of the wall. Well, she could try! He would sit on the picture and not give it up. He would rather spring in Grete's face.

But Grete's words had for the first time really unsettled his mother. She moved to the side, spotted the giant brown fleck on the flowered wallpaper, and cried out in a screeching, raw voice, before she was really fully conscious that it was Gregor that she saw, "Oh my God; oh my God!" She then fell onto the sofa with widespread arms, as if she were altogether giving up, and didn't move. "Gregor, you — !" cried his sister with a raised fist and piercing gaze. They were the first words she had directly addressed to Gregor since his transformation. She ran into the next room in order to get some scent with which she could wake her mother out of her faint. Gregor wanted to help, too — there was still time to save the picture — but he was stuck to the glass and had to tear himself free. He, too, ran into the next room, as if he could give his sister some advice, as in earlier days, but then he had to stand helplessly behind her while she rummaged through various bottles. She was startled when she turned around; a bottle fell to the floor and broke. A sliver of glass cut Gregor's face, and some burning medicine spilled over him. Grete took as many bottles as she could carry and ran with them in to her mother. She then slammed the door shut with her foot. Gregor was now shut off from his mother, who was through his fault possibly near death. He couldn't open the door, if he did not want to chase away his sister, who had to remain with his mother. He had nothing left to do but wait. Oppressed by self-reproaches and worry, he began to crawl. He crawled over everything — walls, furniture, and ceiling — and finally, in his despair, he fell, the entire room spinning around him, onto the center of the large table.

A short time passed, and Gregor lay limply there. All around was quiet. Perhaps that was a good sign. Then the bell rang. The servant girl was naturally locked into her kitchen, and so Grete had to go open the door. His father had returned. "What happened?" were his first words. The look on Grete's face betrayed everything to him. Grete answered with a muffled voice — she was obviously pressing her face against her father's chest. "Mother fainted, but she's already better. Gregor broke out." "I was waiting for this," said his father, "I always said it would happen, but you women didn't want to

hear it." It was clear to Gregor that his father had interpreted Grete's all-too-brief announcement in the worst possible way, and assumed that Gregor had been guilty of some act of violence. Therefore Gregor had to try to mollify his father, for he had neither the time nor the ability to enlighten him. And so he fled to the door of his room and pressed against it, so that his father could see immediately on leaving the hallway that Gregor had every intention of returning right away to his room. It would not be necessary to drive him back, just to open the door, and he would disappear instantly.

But his father was not in the mood to notice 60
such subtleties: "Ah!" he cried out on entering, in a tone that made him seem at once furious and glad. Gregor drew his head back from the door and turned it toward his father. His father's appearance was different from the way he remembered it. Lately, due to his new habit of crawling about, Gregor had concerned himself less with the goings-on in the rest of the apartment; he should therefore really have been prepared to encounter new developments. But still, still, was this really his father? The same man who lay, tired out, buried deep in his bed, when Gregor was all set to go on a business trip? The man who, dressed in a nightshirt, had greeted him when he returned in the evenings from an easy chair, and, unable to stand up, only raised his arms to show his joy at his return? The man who, on the rare walks he took together with Gregor and his mother on a few Sundays and the most important holidays of the year, walked packed into his old coat even more slowly than they did, though they walked slowly enough, laboring forward with a deliberately placed cane, and who nearly always stopped when he wanted to say something, gathering his companions around him? Now, he was quite well put together. He was dressed in the kind of close-fitting blue uniform with gold buttons that doormen at the banking houses wore; over the high stiff collar of the coat his pronounced double chin protruded; under his bushy eyebrows the glance of his dark eyes sprang forth fresh and alert; the formerly disheveled white hair was combed flat into a painfully exact, shining part. He threw his hat, which bore a gold monogram — probably that of a bank — in an arc across the room and onto the sofa. He moved towards Gregor, the ends of his long coat pushed back, his hands in his pants pockets, his face grim. He probably did not know himself what he planned to do. In any case he lifted his feet unusually high, and Gregor was astonished at the gigantic size of the soles of his boots. But he didn't let his astonishment distract him. He had known from the first day of his new life that his father considered the greatest severity appropriate in dealing with him. And so he ran away from his father. He froze when his father stood still and hurried forward again when his father moved a muscle. In this way they circled the room several times, without anything decisive happening; the whole thing moved at such a slow tempo that it didn't even look like a pursuit. For the time being, Gregor stayed on the floor. He was afraid that his father might consider flight toward the walls or the ceiling as particular wickedness. But Gregor realized that he couldn't keep up even this pace for long, for when his father took a single step, he had to carry out myriad movements. He soon felt short of breath; his lungs had not been reliable even in the old days. As he staggered forward, he could barely keep his eyes open, so hard did he try to concentrate his energy for running. In his dullness he was simply unable to think of any other means of deliverance. He had almost forgotten already that the walls were open to him, though they were obstructed here by painstakingly carved furniture full of points and sharp edges. Suddenly something lightly thrown flew just past him and rolled ahead. It was an apple. Another immediately followed. Gregor froze in fear. Running further was pointless, for his father had decided to bombard him. He had filled his

How might this painting by Francis Bacon, a twentieth-century artist, be interpreted as "Kafkaesque"? Note construction, line, and color as well as the central image.

Francis Bacon *Head VI*, 1949/Arts Council Collection, Southbank Centre, London, UK/Bridgeman Images. Artwork: © The Estate of Francis Bacon. All rights reserved./DACS, London/ARS, NY 2016. Image: Bridgeman Images.

pockets from the fruit bowl on the credenza and now threw apple after apple, without for the time being aiming very carefully. These small red apples rolled around on the ground, knocking into each other as if charged with electricity. A weakly thrown apple strafed Gregor's back, but glanced off without doing any harm. One that flew immediately in its wake actually embedded itself in his back, however. Gregor tried to drag himself forward, as if he could outrun the unbelievable pain by changing position, but he felt as if he were nailed to the spot and lay sprawled upon the ground, in complete distraction of all of his senses. With his last conscious glance he watched as the door to his room was ripped open and, ahead of his screaming sister, his mother ran out of the room in her slip — for his sister had undressed her to let her breathe freely while in her faint — and raced towards his father, her untied skirts slipping down to the floor one after another; he watched as, stumbling on the skirts, she embraced his father, fully at one with him — but Gregor's vision now failed him utterly — and, with her hands clasped around the back of his head, begged him to spare Gregor's life.

III

The deep injury from which Gregor had suffered for over a month — the apple remained embedded in his flesh as a visible memento, as no one dared to remove it — seemed to have reminded even his father that despite his present sad and repulsive state, Gregor was a member of the family who should not be treated as an enemy. The law of familial obligation dictated, rather, that one had to swallow one's revulsion and be tolerant, simply be tolerant.

And though Gregor had probably permanently lost some mobility through his injury, and now, like an invalid, took many, many minutes to cross his room — crawling on high was out of the question — this degeneration in his condition brought with it a compensation that was to his mind completely satisfactory. Toward evening they now opened the living room door so that, lying in the darkness of his room and invisible from the living room, he could watch the entire family at the lighted table and listen to their conversation by general consent, as it were — a complete change from the early days when he used to watch the door like a hawk an hour or two before they gathered.

Of course, the conversations were not as lively as in earlier days. Gregor used to recall them longingly in the small hotel rooms where he had had to throw himself, exhausted, into the damp bedclothes. These days everything was mostly very quiet. His father fell asleep in his

armchair soon after the evening meal; his mother and sister urged one another to silence. His mother now sewed fine lingerie for a boutique, bending close to her work under the light. His sister, who had taken a job as a sales-clerk, studied stenography and French at night, in order to find a better position one day. Sometimes his father awoke and, as if he didn't realize that he had been sleeping, would say to his mother: "How long you're sewing again today!" Then he would fall asleep again immediately, while his mother and sister exchanged tired smiles.

With a kind of stubbornness his father refused to take off his work uniform when he returned home, and while his nightshirt hung, useless, on a clothes hook, he dozed at his place fully clothed, as if he were always on duty and awaited the call of his superiors. As a result, the uniform, which hadn't been new in the first place, became less than pristine, despite the care his mother and sister took with it. Gregor often spent whole evenings looking at the badly stained coat, its oft-polished gold buttons shining, in which the old man slept highly uncomfortably, but quietly.

As soon as the clock struck ten, his mother 65
tried to wake his father by speaking softly to him, and tried to persuade him to go to bed, for he couldn't sleep well there, and a good sleep was absolutely essential, since he had to be at work by six. But in the stubbornness that had come over him since he became a bank employee, he always insisted on remaining longer where he was, although he regularly fell asleep again, and required much effort to persuade in exchanging the armchair for his bed. His mother and sister could press him with gentle remonstrances as much as they liked — for a quarter of an hour at a time he slowly shook his head, his eyes closed, and refused to stand up. His mother plucked at his sleeve, and whispered endearments in his ear; his sister left her work in order to help her mother, but got nowhere with him. He only sank deeper into his armchair. Only when the women grasped him under the arms would he open his eyes, look in turn at Gregor's mother and sister, and say, "What a life. This is the peace and quiet of my old age." And bracing himself against the women, he hoisted himself up laboriously, as if he were his own greatest burden, and allowed himself to be led to the door. He waved them off then and went on under his own power, but Gregor's mother would hastily throw down her sewing and his sister her quill in order to run after him and be of further help to him.

Who in this overworked and overtired family had time to worry about Gregor more than was absolutely necessary? The household was ever more reduced in circumstances. The servant girl had been dismissed, and a gigantic, bony servant with white hair that fluttered about her head came in the mornings and the evenings to do the hardest labor. Everything else his mother took care of, in addition to her abundant sewing work. It even came to pass that various pieces of family jewelry, which his mother and sister had previously worn with pleasure at parties and celebrations, were sold, as Gregor learned one evening from a general conversation about the prices obtained. Their greatest source of complaint, however, was that the apartment, far too large for them under the circumstances, could not be left, because it was unthinkable that Gregor be relocated. But Gregor realized that it was not consideration for him that hindered a relocation, for they could have transported him easily in a suitable carton with a few air holes. What really kept the family from changing apartments was despair, and the thought that they had been afflicted by misfortune such as had struck no one in their circle of relatives and acquaintances. They did everything that the world demanded of poor people — his father fetched breakfast for the junior bank clerks; his mother dedicated herself to making underwear for strangers; his sister ran back and forth behind the counter at the beck

and call of customers — but they could do no more than that. And the wound in his back began to hurt Gregor anew when his mother and sister would return from putting his father to bed, let their work lie, and huddle close together, cheek to cheek. His mother, gesturing towards Gregor's room, said, "Close the door, Grete," and Gregor was in the dark again, while next door the women mingled tears or stared, dry-eyed and numb, down at the table.

Gregor passed the days and nights nearly without sleep. Sometimes he considered taking the affairs of the family in hand again, the next time the door was opened. After some time, he thought again about the Director and the Deputy Director, the clerks and the apprentices, the slow-witted porter, two or three friends from other companies, a chambermaid from a hotel in the provinces — a dear, fleeting memory — and a cashier from a hat store whom he had courted seriously, though too slowly. They reappeared in his thoughts together with strangers or people he had already forgotten, but instead of helping him and his family, they all remained detached, and he was glad when they disappeared. At other times, however, he was not in the mood to worry about his family. He was filled with rage at the poor care they took of him, and though he could think of nothing for which he had an appetite, he made plans to reach the pantry and take what was due him, even if he were not hungry. Without considering any longer what might especially please Gregor, mornings and afternoons before returning to the store his sister hurriedly shoved any old kind of food into his room with her foot, only in order to sweep it out with a whisk of the broom in the evenings, indifferent as to whether it might have been merely tasted or — as was usually the case — it remained completely untouched. Her cleaning of the room, which she now always did in the evening, could not have been done any more hastily. Smears of dirt ran along the walls, and here and there lay balls of dust and filth. In the early days Gregor used to position himself upon the arrival of his sister in a particularly grubby corner, in order to reproach her. But he could have remained there for weeks, and his sister would still not have changed her ways. She saw the dirt as well as he did, but she had simply decided to leave it there. At the same time, with a touchiness entirely new to her that had now possessed the entire family, she was vigilant in making sure that the straightening of Gregor's room was left to her. His mother once undertook a thorough cleaning of Gregor's room, which had required several buckets of water — the moisture bothered Gregor, and he lay broad, embittered, and unmoving on top of the sofa — but his mother did not go unpunished. That evening his sister had hardly registered the change in Gregor's room when, highly insulted, she ran into the living room, and despite her mother's beseechingly raised hands, broke into a spasm of tears that his parents — his father had naturally been frightened out of his seat — at first simply watched, helpless with astonishment. Then they, too, were affected: on one side, his father reproached his mother for not leaving the cleaning of Gregor's room to his sister; on the other side, he shouted at his sister that she would never be allowed to clean Gregor's room again. In the meantime, his mother tried to drag his father, who was beside himself with agitation, into the bedroom; his sister, racked by sobs, hammered the table with her small fists; and Gregor hissed loudly with fury that no one thought to close the door and so spare him the scene and the noise.

But even if his sister, exhausted from her work, could no longer manage to care for Gregor as she had earlier, his mother would still not have had to intervene in order to keep Gregor from being neglected. For there was still the servant. This old widow, who had weathered the worst in her long life with the help of a powerful frame, felt no especial revulsion towards Gregor. Without exactly being curious, she had once by

chance opened the door to Gregor's room and stood staring at the sight of him, her hands folded across her chest. Gregor was completely taken by surprise, and despite the fact that no one was chasing him, he began to run back and forth. Since that time, she hadn't missed a chance to open the door quickly in the morning and the evening to look in at Gregor. At first she called him over to her with words that she probably considered friendly, like "Come on over here, you old dung beetle!" or "Look at the old dung beetle!" Gregor did not respond to such overtures, but remained motionless in his place, as if the door had not even been opened. If only they would order this servant to clean his room daily, instead of letting her needlessly disturb him at will! Once in the early morning — a hard rain, perhaps already a sign of the coming spring, beat on the windowpanes — Gregor became so embittered when the servant began to speak that he turned towards her, as if to attack, though slowly and feebly. Instead of being afraid, however, the servant simply lifted high into the air a chair that stood in reach of the door. As she stood there with her mouth opened wide, it was clear that she intended to shut her mouth only after the chair in her hands had come down on Gregor's back. "That's it, then?" she asked, as Gregor turned around again, and she put the chair quietly back in its corner.

Gregor now ate almost nothing. When he happened to pass by the food prepared for him, he sometimes idly took a bite and held it in his mouth for an hour or so, only to spit most of it out again. At first he thought that his sorrow over the state of his room kept him from eating, but he had actually reconciled himself very soon to the changes. The family had gotten into the habit of putting into his room things that wouldn't fit anywhere else: there were now many such things, as they had rented one room in the apartment out to three lodgers. These three serious gentlemen — all three had full beards, as Gregor discovered once by looking through the crack in the door — were painfully focused on order, not only in their room, but, simply because they had taken lodgings there, in the entire household, especially in the kitchen. They would not put up with useless or dirty things. And in any case, they had brought with them most of their own furnishings. For this reason, many things that were not saleable, but that the family did not want to throw away, had become superfluous. All of this made its way into Gregor's room — even, eventually, the ash bin and the rubbish bin from the kitchen. The servant, who was always in a rush, simply slung anything that was at the moment unuseable into Gregor's room. Fortunately Gregor usually saw only the relevant object and the hand that held it. The servant might once have intended to take the things out again when time and opportunity permitted, or perhaps to throw them all out together once and for all, but in practice they lay wherever they were tossed, unless Gregor wound his way through the clutter and stirred it up — first because he had no other place to crawl, and later with growing pleasure, although after such forays, tired to death and full of sorrow, he could not stir for hours.

Because the lodgers sometimes took their 70
evening meal in the common living room, the living room door remained closed on some evenings. Gregor managed without it very well. On some evenings when it was open he did not even take advantage of it, but without the family's knowing it, lay in the darkest corner of his room. Once, however, the servant left the door to his room open a bit, and it remained open, even as the lodgers came in that evening and the light was turned on. They sat at the head of the table, where in former days his father, mother, and Gregor had eaten, unfolded their napkins, and took their knives and forks in hand. His mother immediately appeared in the doorway with a dish of meat and his sister directly behind her with a dish piled high with potatoes. The steaming food gave off a rich smell. The

lodgers bent over the dishes placed before them as if they wanted to check them before eating, and the one in the middle, whom the other two appeared to consider an authority, actually cut off a piece of meat still in the serving dish, obviously to test whether it were tender enough, or whether it might perhaps need to be sent back to the kitchen. He was satisfied, and mother and sister, who had watched the proceedings tensely, breathed again and smiled.

The family themselves ate in the kitchen. Nevertheless, his father, before he went into the kitchen, came into the room and made a single long bow while circling the table, cap in hand. The lodgers all rose together and murmured something into their beards. When they were alone again, they ate in near total silence. It seemed strange to Gregor that, among all the various sounds of eating, he could pick out the sound of their chewing teeth — it was as if Gregor were thereby reminded that one needed teeth in order to eat, and that one could do nothing with even the most beautiful toothless jaws. "I do have an appetite," said Gregor sorrowfully to himself, "but not for these things. How these lodgers feed themselves, while I'm dying of hunger!"

On this very evening, though Gregor did not remember having heard it once before during that whole time, the violin sounded from the kitchen. The lodgers had already finished their meal. The middle one had pulled out a newspaper and given each of the others one page. They now read, leaning back, and smoked. As the violin began to play, they became alert, arose and went on tiptoes to the hall door, where they stood pressed up against one another. They must have heard them in the kitchen, for his father called out: "Do you gentlemen perhaps dislike the playing? It can be stopped immediately." "On the contrary," said the lodger in the middle, "wouldn't the young lady like to come out and play here in this room, where it's much more comfortable and convenient?" "Oh, please!" called his father, as if he were the violin player. The lodgers moved back into the room and waited. His father soon came in with the music stand, his mother with the music, and his sister with the violin. His sister quietly prepared to play. His parents, who had never rented a room out before and so exaggerated the courtesy due the lodgers, did not dare to sit on their own chairs. His father leaned against the door, his right hand stuck between two buttons of his fastened livery coat. His mother, however, accepted a chair offered by one of the lodgers, and sat off in the corner where he had happened to place the chair.

His sister began to play. His father and mother, on either side of her, followed every note, attentive to the movements of her hands. Gregor, drawn by the music, had ventured a bit further forward. His head was already in the living room. He hardly wondered at himself for being so inconsiderate towards the others of late; earlier, this consideration had been a great source of pride. And just now he had more reason than before to hide himself. Because of the dust everywhere in his room that flew up at the least movement, he was himself covered in dust. Threads, hairs, and bits of leftover food stuck to his back and sides. His general apathy was much too great for him now to lie on his back and scrub himself on the carpet, as he used to do several times a day. Despite his condition, however, he had no qualms about advancing a bit onto the immaculate living room floor.

But no one paid any attention to him. His family was entirely absorbed in the playing of the violin. The lodgers, on the other hand, who had at first, their hands in their pants pockets, taken up positions inconveniently close to his sister's music stand, in order to see all the notes, soon withdrew to the window, their heads bowed amidst whispered conversation, and remained there with Gregor's father worriedly observing them. It was now painfully obvious that they were disappointed in what they had

This painting, by Yosl Bergner, depicts Gregor's reaction to Grete's violin: "The music gripped him — was he then an animal?" **How does Bergner's work address this question?**

assumed would be a beautiful or entertaining performance, and that they were sick of the entire production and now allowed their quiet to be disturbed only out of politeness. The way they all blew their cigar smoke out of their mouths and noses indicated great irritation. But his sister played so beautifully! Her face was turned to the side; her gaze followed the lines of notes, searching and sorrowful. Gregor crept further forward and held his head close to the floor, in order to meet her gaze if possible. The music gripped him — was he then an animal? He felt as if he were being guided to the sustenance he had unknowingly desired. He was determined to press on all the way to his sister, to pull on her skirt and let her know that she could come into his room with her violin. No one here knew how to appreciate her playing the way he did. He wanted never to let her out of his room again, at least not as long as he lived. His terrifying shape would finally be of some use to him: he would be at all doors of his room at once, hissing at all intruders. His sister, though, would not be forced, but would rather stay with him willingly. She would sit next to him on the sofa, her ear inclined towards him, and he would confide in her that he had intended to send her to the conservatory, and that, were it not for the misfortune that had occurred, he had intended to announce it to everyone last Christmas — Christmas had surely passed already? — ignoring any possible objections. After this declaration, his sister would surely burst into tears of emotion, and Gregor would lift himself up to her shoulder and kiss her neck, which she now left uncovered, without ribbon or collar, since she had begun working at the store.

"Mr. Samsa!" called the middle lodger and 75
without wasting another word, pointed at Gregor, who was slowly inching his way forward. The violin fell silent. The middle lodger smiled at first, shaking his head at his friends, and then looked down again at Gregor. His father seemed to consider it more urgent to reassure the lodgers than to drive Gregor back, despite the fact that they seemed calm and more entertained by Gregor than by the violin. He hurried over to them and tried with outspread arms to urge them into their room; at the same time, he wanted to block their view of Gregor with his body. They actually became a bit angry now, though it was unclear whether this was over his father's behavior or over the dawning recognition that, unbeknownst to them, they had all the while had a neighbor like Gregor. They asked his father for an explanation, raised their arms, pulled agitatedly at their beards and only reluctantly retreated into their room. In the meantime his sister had come out of the trance into which

she had fallen after her playing had been so suddenly broken off. For a time she had held her violin and bow in her limply hanging hands and continued to stare at the music, as if she were still playing. Now, all at once, she pulled herself together, laid the instrument in the lap of her mother, who, short of breath and gasping for air, was still seated, and ran into the next room, which the lodgers were now approaching more quickly at the urging of her father. Under her practiced hands, the covers and pillows flew high in the air and arranged themselves. Before the lodgers had reached the room, she was finished readying the beds and had slipped out. His father's stubbornness seemed to have returned to the extent that he forgot all respect that he owed his lodgers. He kept urging them and urging them, until finally at the threshold the gentleman in the middle resoundingly stamped his foot and so brought his father to a standstill. "I hereby declare," he said, and, raising his hand, sought the gaze of Gregor's mother and sister, as well, "that, in consideration of the revolting conditions existing in this apartment and this family" — and here, without a moment's hesitation, he spat on the ground — "I give notice this instant. I will naturally pay absolutely nothing for the days I have lived here; on the contrary, I will consider bringing charges against you, which will — believe me — be very easy to prove." He fell silent and stared straight ahead, as if he were waiting for something. His two friends then obliged him by chiming in with the words: "We, too, give notice this instant." At that, he seized the door handle and shut the door with a crash.

His father staggered to his chair, his hands stretched out before him, and fell into it. It looked as if he were stretching himself out for his usual evening nap, but his head, sharply, ceaselessly nodding, showed that he was not sleeping at all. Gregor had lain all this time in the same spot where the lodgers had discovered him. His disappointment at the failure of his plans — perhaps, though, too, the weakness caused by his long hunger — made it impossible for him to move. He was distinctly afraid that in the next moment everything was going to come crashing down on top of him. He waited. Not even the violin roused him, which slipped from his mother's trembling fingers and fell from her lap, emitting a ringing tone.

"My dear parents," said his sister and struck her hand on the table by way of preamble, "we can't go on like this. If you can't see it, I can. I don't want to use the name of my brother in front of this monster, so let me just say this: we have to try to get rid of it. We have tried as much as humanly possible to care for it and to put up with it. I don't think it could reproach us in the least."

"She is absolutely right," said his father under his breath. His mother, who seemed not to have caught her breath yet, began to emit a muffled cough into the hand she held before her, a crazed expression in her eyes.

His sister hurried to his mother and put her hand to her forehead. His sister's words seemed to have put his father's thoughts in a surer course. He sat up straight, fiddling with his uniform cap amongst the plates that still sat on the table from the lodgers' evening meal, and looked for a time down at the quiet Gregor.

"We must try to get rid of it," his sister finally 80
said to his father, for his mother heard nothing in the midst of her coughing. "It's going to kill you both; I can see it coming. When people have to work as hard as we do, they can't bear this kind of constant torture at home. I can't bear it any more." And she began crying so hard that her tears flowed down her mother's face, where she began mechanically wiping them away with her hand.

"But my child," said his father, sympathetically and with striking compassion, "what should we do?"

His sister only shrugged her shoulders as a sign of the helplessness that had during her crying spell taken the place of her former

certainty. "But if he understood us—" his father said, half questioningly. His sister, in the midst of her tears, waved her hand violently as a sign that that was out of the question.

"If he understood us," his father repeated, and by closing his eyes, tried to absorb her certainty that it was impossible, "then we might be able to arrive at some arrangement with him. But as things stand—"

"It has to go," cried his sister. "That is the only way, father. You must simply try to rid yourself of the thought that it's Gregor. Our real misfortune is that we believed it for so long. But how can it be Gregor? If it were Gregor, he would have seen long ago that such an animal cannot live with people and he would have left voluntarily. We would then have had no brother, but we could have lived on and honored his memory. But this beast persecutes us, drives off the lodgers, and obviously wants to take over the apartment and force us to sleep out in the alley. Just look, Father," she suddenly screamed, "he's starting again!" And in a state of terror totally incomprehensible to Gregor, his sister abandoned his mother and practically vaulted off her chair, as if she would rather sacrifice her than remain in Gregor's vicinity. She hurried behind her father who, agitated entirely through her behavior, stood up as well and half raised his arms as if to protect her.

But it wasn't at all Gregor's intent to upset anyone, especially not his sister. He had just begun to turn himself around in order to make his way back into his room. Of course, that procedure looked peculiar enough, because his ailing condition meant that in order to turn even with difficulty he had to help with his head, which he lifted repeatedly and braced against the ground. He paused and looked around. His good intentions seemed to be recognized: it had only been a momentary fright. They all looked at him, silent and sorrowful. His mother lay in her chair, her legs stretched before her and pressed together; her eyes were nearly falling shut from exhaustion. His father and sister sat next to one another, his sister with her hand laid around her father's neck.

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"Maybe they'll allow me to turn around now," thought Gregor, and started to work on it again. He could not suppress the wheezing caused by his exertion, and he had to stop and rest now and then. No one rushed him: he was left to his own devices. When he had completed the turn, he immediately headed straight back. He was astonished by the vast distance that divided him from his room, and he could not grasp how in his weakened condition he had put the entire distance behind him, almost without noticing it. Focused solely on crawling as quickly as possible, he hardly noticed that no word and

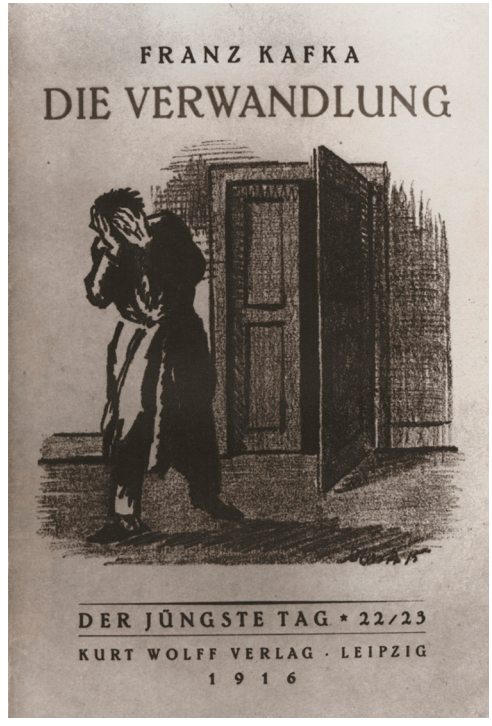

Photo © PVDE / Bridgeman Images

Kafka insisted that the cover of *The Metamorphosis* not include a visual representation of Gregor in his transformed state. **In what ways do you think that this first-edition cover captures the spirit and ideas of the novella?**

no outcry from his family disturbed him. He turned his head only when he was already at the door — not all the way, for he felt his neck getting stiff, but enough to see that nothing had changed behind him, except for the fact that his sister had stood up. His last glance fell on his mother, who was now fast asleep.

He was hardly in his room when the door was hastily pushed to, bolted fast and locked. The sudden noise behind him frightened Gregor so much that his legs buckled beneath him. It was his sister who had rushed to do it. She had stood, waiting, and had suddenly sprung forward, light-footed — Gregor had not even heard her coming — crying out to her parents "Finally!" as she turned the key in the lock.

"And now?" Gregor asked himself, and looked around in the dark. He soon discovered that he could no longer move at all. He didn't wonder at this; on the contrary, it had seemed unnatural to him that he had actually been able to move before on such thin legs. Besides that, however, he felt relatively comfortable. He did have pains all over his body, but it seemed to him that they were becoming weaker and weaker and would finally die away altogether. He could hardly feel the rotten apple in his back or the inflamed surrounding area, which was now completely covered in moist dust. He thought of his family with compassion and love. His conviction that he had to disappear was even more definite than his sister's. He remained in this state of empty and peaceful contemplation until the clock tower struck three. He experienced once more the approach of daylight outside the window. Then, unwilled, his head sank fully down, and from his nostrils his last breath weakly streamed forth.

When the servant came in the early morning — though she had often been asked to refrain from doing so, she slammed all the doors out of sheer vigor and haste, to such an extent that it was not possible to sleep quietly anywhere in the apartment once she had arrived — she noticed nothing unusual at first in her morning visit to Gregor. She thought that he intentionally lay there motionless because he found her behavior insulting; she credited him with all manner of intelligence. As she happened to be holding her long broom in her hand, she tried to tickle Gregor with it from the door. When she met with no response, she became irritated and poked him a bit. Only when she had shoved him from his spot without meeting any resistance did she become alert. She soon understood the situation. Her eyes widened, and she whistled out loud. It wasn't long before she had flung the door of the master bedroom open and called loudly into the darkness: "Look, everyone, it's kicked the bucket; it's lying there, dead as a doornail!"

The Samsas sat bolt upright in bed and had 90
first to overcome their alarm at the servant's behavior before they could understand her report. Then, however, they climbed hurriedly out of bed, one on each side. Mr. Samsa threw the blanket over his shoulders; Mrs. Samsa emerged in her nightgown. In this manner they entered Gregor's room. In the meantime Grete had opened the door to the living room, where she had been sleeping since the arrival of the lodgers. She was completely dressed, as if she had not slept; her pale face confirmed the impression. "Dead?" said Mrs. Samsa, and looked questioningly up at the servant, although she could have made her own investigation or even have recognized the fact without making any investigation. "I'd say so," said the servant, and as proof, she pushed Gregor's corpse further to one side with the broom. Mrs. Samsa moved as if she wanted to hold her back, but she didn't. "Well," said Mr. Samsa, "now we can thank God." He crossed himself, and the three women followed his example. Grete, who did not take her eyes from the corpse, said: "Just look at how thin he was. He hadn't eaten anything for so long. The food came out just the way it went in." Gregor's body was indeed completely flat and

dry; it was really only possible to see it now that he was off his legs and nothing else distracted the eye.

"Come, Grete, come sit with us for a bit," said Mrs. Samsa with a wistful smile, and Grete followed her parents into their bedroom, though not without looking back at the corpse. The servant shut the door and opened the window wide. Despite the early morning the fresh air already had something mild mixed in it. It was, after all, already the end of March.

The three lodgers emerged from their room and looked in amazement for their breakfast. It had been forgotten. "Where is breakfast?" the middlemost of the men asked the servant sullenly. She laid a finger to her lips and then silently and hastily signaled to the men that they might come into Gregor's room. They came and stood around Gregor's corpse in the now completely bright room, their hands in the pockets of their somewhat shabby coats.

The door to the bedroom opened then, and Mr. Samsa appeared in his livery with his wife on one arm and his daughter on the other. They had all been crying; Grete pressed her face from time to time to her father's arm.

"Leave my apartment immediately!" said Mr. Samsa and pointed to the door, without letting the women leave his side. "What do you mean?" said the middle lodger, somewhat dismayed, and smiled mawkishly. The two others held their hands behind their backs and rubbed them together continuously, as if in joyful expectation of a great fight, which would, they were sure, end favorably for them. "I mean exactly what I say," answered Mr. Samsa, and advanced in a line with his companions toward the lodger. He stood quietly, at first, and looked at the ground, as if the things in his head were arranging themselves in a new order. "Then we'll go," he said and looked up at Mr. Samsa, as if a sudden access of humility required him to seek renewed approval even for this decision. Mr. Samsa merely nodded shortly several times, his eyes wide and staring. At this, the man immediately walked with long strides into the foyer. His two friends had listened at first, their hands completely still, and they now skipped after him directly, as if in fear that Mr. Samsa could step in front of them in the foyer and disrupt their connection to their leader. In the hall all three of them took their hats from the rack, drew their walking sticks from the stand, bowed mutely, and left the apartment. In what proved to be a completely unnecessary precaution, Mr. Samsa walked out with the two women onto the landing. Leaning on the railing, they watched as the three men slowly but steadily descended the stairs, disappearing on every floor at the turning of the stairwell, and emerging again after a few moments. The lower they went, the more the Samsa family lost interest in them, and as a butcher's boy carrying his burden on his head with dignity passed them and then climbed high above them, Mr. Samsa left the landing with the women and they all returned, as if freed from a burden, to their apartment.

They decided to spend the day resting and 95
taking a stroll. They had not only earned this rest from work, they absolutely needed it. And so they sat at the table and wrote three letters of excuse, Mr. Samsa to the bank directors, Mrs. Samsa to her employer, and Grete to her supervisor. While they were writing the servant entered in order to say that she was leaving, as her morning work was finished. Writing, the three of them merely nodded at first, without looking up; only when the servant failed to depart did they look up angrily. "Well?" asked Mr. Samsa. The servant stood in the door, smiling, as if she had some great piece of good news to report to the family, but would only do so if she were thoroughly interrogated. The nearly upright little ostrich feather on her hat, which had annoyed Mr. Samsa the entire time she had been employed there, waved freely in all directions. "Well, what do you want?" asked Mrs. Samsa, for whom the servant had the most

respect. "Well," the servant answered, and could not say more right away, fairly bursting with friendly laughter, "well, you needn't worry about getting rid of that thing next door. It's all been taken care of." Mrs. Samsa and Grete bent to their letters again, as if they wanted to continue writing. Mr. Samsa, who saw that the servant was about to begin describing everything in great detail, decisively headed this off with an outstretched hand. Since she was not going to be allowed to tell her story, she suddenly remembered her great haste, and, obviously deeply insulted, called out, "'Bye, everyone," then spun around wildly and left the apartment amidst a terrific slamming of doors.

"Tonight we're firing her," said Mr. Samsa, but received no answer either from his wife or from his daughter, for the servant seemed to have disturbed their but newly restored calm. They rose, went to the window, and remained there, their arms around each other. Mr. Samsa turned in his chair as they went and quietly observed them for a while. Then he called out, "Well, come over here. Let what's past be past. And take some care of me, for once." The women obeyed immediately, hurrying over to him and caressing him, and then quickly finished their letters.

Then all three of them left the apartment together, which they had not done for months, and took a trolley to the open air beyond the city. The car they sat in was drenched with warm sunlight. Leaning back comfortably in their seats, they discussed their future prospects, and it emerged that these were not at all bad on closer inspection, for all three of their positions were altogether favorable at present and, most importantly, had great potential for the future. The greatest improvement of their present situation would have to come, naturally, from a change of apartments. They would want a smaller and cheaper apartment, but one that was better located and generally more convenient than their current apartment, which Gregor had originally found for them. While they conversed in this way, it occurred to both Mr. and Mrs. Samsa in the same moment in looking at their ever more lively daughter that despite the recent ordeals that had made her cheeks so pale, she had blossomed into a pretty and well-developed young woman. Becoming quieter and almost unconsciously communicating through glances, they realized that it would soon be time to look for a good husband for her. And it seemed to them a confirmation of their new dreams and good intentions, when, at the end of their journey, their daughter rose first and stretched her young body.

[1915]

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. The story opens, "When Gregor Samsa awoke in his bed one morning from unquiet dreams, he found himself transformed into an enormous insect." When you first read those lines, did you find them humorous? When did you begin to understand the serious intent, or did the fantastic or surreal situation make it difficult for you to take the story seriously? Could this "metamorphosis" be a dream?
2. Among Gregor's responses to his transformation, we see anxiety, frustration, and surprise, but not shock. In fact, we're told that Gregor "was eager to see how today's fantasies would gradually resolve themselves" (para. 8). What do you think Franz Kafka's purpose might be in not presenting Gregor as horrified by the discovery that he has transformed into an insect?
3. What does Kafka's choice to make Gregor a traveling salesman suggest? What details of Gregor's professional life do we learn, and how might his profession connect to his turning into a bug? Consider Kafka's description of Gregor as "condemned to work at a company where the least infraction immediately attracted the greatest suspicion" (para. 15).
4. What information does Gregor learn about the family's "entire financial situation and their prospects" (para. 43)? How would you characterize

Gregor's reaction to this revelation? Why do you think he does not react with more anger or resentment?

5. How does each family member initially react to Gregor's transformation? What do their responses say about each of them? How do those reactions change or intensify over the course of the novella?

6. Who do you believe holds the most power in this story of the Samsa family, and why? Does the balance of power shift over time? In what ways could Gregor's transformation be seen as a way to obtain power?

7. In the opening paragraph of Part III, Gregor is described as "a member of the family who should not be treated as an enemy. The laws of familial obligation dictated, rather, that one had to swallow one's revulsion and be tolerant, simply be tolerant." From whose perspective is this statement written? How do you interpret that "familial obligation"? Do you think it is meant to be an indictment of his family? Why or why not?

8. Kafka refers to the new jobs that Gregor's parents and sister take on as "everything that the world demanded of poor people" (para. 66). In what light does Kafka portray them here? Is he suggesting they are admirable for taking care of themselves? Is he taking a sarcastic tone about the fact that they have to work? Explain, using details from the text to support your answer.

9. When Grete plays her violin, Gregor is "drawn by the music" (para. 73) and enters the living room. We witness this scene from his perspective: "The music gripped him — was he then an animal?" (para. 74). How do you answer that question? How do you think Kafka answers it?

10. What qualities from before his metamorphosis does Gregor retain, particularly in his death scene (paras. 84–88)? Does Kafka present this final act in such a way that we could interpret it as a suicide or murder? Or does Gregor just fade away?

11. How do the minor characters contribute to the themes — such as the dissolution of the family or dehumanization of the urban work force — in *The Metamorphosis*? Consider the Deputy Director, the Samsa family's servants, and the boarders.

12. In what ways does Grete's transformation parallel Gregor's? In what ways does it differ? Would her "metamorphosis" have been possible had Gregor remained the dutiful salesman going to work each day? Why or why not?

13. How do you interpret the final paragraph of *The Metamorphosis*? Do you think that Kafka wanted his readers to see the ending as a positive new beginning, a resigned statement that life goes on, or an indictment of our failure to accept difference? Or is it something else? Cite specific passages to support your response.

14. While *The Metamorphosis* has many traditional narrative elements — a logical plot, a coherent sense of time and place, characters developed over the course of the work — Kafka departs from tradition in the way he combines vastly different elements of the grotesque with the everyday, presenting the beautiful alongside the disgusting. Find two examples of such juxtapositions and discuss how they contribute to one of Kafka's central themes.

QUESTIONS ON STYLE AND STRUCTURE

1. By the end of Part I, has Kafka made us root for Gregor? What literary techniques does Kafka employ to build sympathy for him? Cite specific passages to explain how Kafka elicits your response.

2. *The Metamorphosis* contains many references to sleep and dreams. The first sentence of the novella begins with the phrase, "When Gregor Samsa awoke in his bed one morning from unquiet dreams. . . ." Might Kafka be suggesting that Gregor's metamorphosis is entirely a dream? Identify at least four passages and explain how they support or challenge this interpretation.

3. *The Metamorphosis* is told in the third person, but we are privy to what Gregor is thinking and feeling. How does this point of view affect the reader's understanding of his situation? Cite specific passages to support your response.

4. What elements of irony do you find in paragraph 6? Pay special attention to the people who govern Gregor's life — that is, those who make rules and those who affect his sense of self-worth. What other examples of irony do you find in the story? Analyze the effect of at least two.

5. The concept of time is central to the novella's opening. What references to time — clocks, deadlines,

numbers that control Gregor's day, schedules — do you find in Part I? What assertion might Kafka be making with this language and these images?

6. Beginning in paragraph 9, Kafka describes, in great detail, Gregor's difficulties with moving and manipulating his new, unfamiliar body as he tries to get out of bed. What do you believe is Kafka's purpose in providing such a vivid description of his physical movements, and what is the effect? Is the humor intentional, or are these descriptions meant to evoke pity? Explain.
7. The events in the novella take place almost entirely within the Samsa apartment, though we see the hospital from the window. What is the significance of this setting? What does Kafka achieve by limiting it in this way? Why do you think Kafka describes in such rich detail the surroundings that are "home" to the Samsa family?
8. How does Kafka use images of freedom and entrapment to develop his theme(s) in *The Metamorphosis*? Identify several specific examples and analyze their effect.
9. Speech — language — is central to the story of *The Metamorphosis*. When Gregor first tries to speak, he is "terrified" because his "old voice" is mixed with "an irrepressible, painful, squeaking noise" (para. 7). How does Kafka develop this relationship between voice and power (or the lack of both)?
10. How does Kafka employ humor in *The Metamorphosis*? Is the tone outright sarcastic, or is it more subtle? Would you characterize it as hilarious comedy? as dark humor? Discuss at least two examples of Kafka's skillful use of different types of humor in the novella and the purpose they serve.
11. The final paragraph of Part I is filled with physical and psychological violence. To what extent has Kafka prepared readers for this violence? How does the language describing Gregor and his father's confrontation serve Kafka's purpose? How does the scene that ends Part II — in which Gregor's father pummels him with apples — both parallel and depart from the last paragraph of Part I?
12. Where is the tipping point in the plot — a shift, an event, or revelation that signals a significant change? Consider how the three "sections" structure the novella. If you had to point to a paragraph or two as the climax of the novella, which would you choose, and why?

SUGGESTIONS FOR WRITING

1. Why does Gregor feel "drawn once again into the circle of humanity" (para. 23)? What does this transitory hope suggest about Gregor? In what ways does Kafka signal the gradual diminution of his humanity? What elements of humanity, if any, does Gregor retain until the very end? Be sure to analyze the text of the novella and avoid plot summary.
2. How does the motif of money shape the relationships between and among the members of the Samsa family? In your response, explain whether you believe Kafka suggests that the dissolution of the family is the result or cause of a culture dominated by materialism.
3. One critic made this point about Kafka's work: "As political estrangement becomes more and more the norm of Western society, and as capitalism, as Kafka said, becomes 'the condition of the world and the soul,' Kafka's fears will more and more provide the frame in which we read his work." Write an essay analyzing how this commentary affects your interpretation of *The Metamorphosis*.
4. In a lecture delivered to new college students at the outset of their first semester, Professor Warren Breckman discussed *The Metamorphosis*, which all incoming students were required to read over the summer:

> Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* strikes me as a particularly well-chosen novel . . . and I say this not only because the adult life into which you are entering will inevitably have its Kafkaesque moments. Rather, with its exploration of identity, of belonging and exclusion, of tolerance and intolerance, *The Metamorphosis* raises many questions for people like you, students who are facing a time of transition and transformation. Of course, my hope is that your education . . . will not transform you into beetles, but into less earth-bound creatures. Nonetheless, the tale of the unfortunate Gregor Samsa can make us think more deeply about our own identity, about the fluidity of what we take to be stable and fixed, and about the perils and miracles of our own metamorphoses.

What is his central point? Explain why you agree or disagree with him that *The Metamorphosis* would be an appropriate — and compelling — text for new college students to read and discuss with their peers and professors.

5. When he was thirty-six, Kafka wrote a "Letter to his Father" ("Brief an den Vater"), a long document in which he took stock of their troubled relationship. He never sent the letter and it remained unpublished until recently. At one point, he recalls an incident that took place when he was six years old. He had kept his parents awake by repeatedly asking for water, and in response his exasperated father left him on the balcony of their apartment for a while, dressed only in his pajamas. Kafka admits that his father rarely applied physical punishment, yet the threat of violence, particularly psychological, was all around. He wrote, "For years to come, I suffered agonies when I imagined how this giant man, my father, the ultimate authority, could come, for practically no reason, and carry me from my bed to the *Pawlatsche* [balcony] at night, and that I was such a nothing to him." Research the relationship between Kafka and his father further, then write an essay that examines how it influenced and may even be reflected in *The Metamorphosis*.

6. In his essay "The Beetle and the Fly," filmmaker David Cronenberg compares the plight of Gregor with that of the protagonist in his movie *The Fly*:

> In the movie I co-wrote and directed of George Langelaan's short story *The Fly*, I have our hero Seth Brundle, played by Jeff Goldblum, say, while deep in the throes of his transformation into a hideous fly/human hybrid, "I'm an insect who dreamt he was a man and loved it. But now the dream is over, and the insect is awake." He is warning his former lover that he is now a danger to her, a creature with no compassion and no empathy. He has shed his humanity like the shell of a cicada nymph, and what has emerged is no longer human. He is also suggesting that to be a human, a self-aware consciousness, is a dream that cannot last, an illusion. Gregor too has trouble clinging to what is left of his humanity, and as his family begins to feel that this thing in Gregor's room is no longer Gregor, he begins to feel the same way.

After watching the film, consider this quotation as you compare and contrast the concept of "metamorphosis" in both works. What social commentary does each work provide? In what ways does *The Fly* depart from *The Metamorphosis*? Consider such elements as theme, narrative structure, and characterization.

7. Develop your own interpretation of *The Metamorphosis* using multimedia tools — audio, visual, or both. Explain why you made the choices you did.

8. Both *The Metamorphosis* by Franz Kafka and "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892) by Charlotte Perkins Gilman explore themes of confinement and alienation. After reading "The Yellow Wallpaper," compare and contrast each work's treatment of the outsider. Pay particular attention to what forces frustrate the protagonists, how the transformation of each is a response to those forces, and whether you interpret each narrative's ending as bleak or more optimistic.

9. A reader sent the following letter to Franz Kafka in 1917:

> Dear Sir:
>
> You have made me unhappy.
>
> I bought your "Metamorphosis" as a gift for my cousin. But she is incapable of understanding the story. My cousin gave it to her mother who doesn't understand it either. Her mother gave the book to my other cousin, who also didn't find an explanation. Now they have written to me. They expect me to explain the story to them since I am the Ph.D. in the family. But I am at a loss to explain it.
>
> Sir! I have spent months in the trenches exchanging blows with the Russians without batting an eyelash. But I could not stand losing my good name with my cousins. Only you can help me. You must do it since you are the one who landed me in this mess. So please tell me what my cousin should think about Metamorphosis.
>
> Most respectfully yours,
>
> Dr. Siegfried Wolff

Many would agree with Dr. Wolff's cousin that *The Metamorphosis* resists interpretation, or at least a single or literal reading. How would you explain the "story" of the novella to someone else? How might Kafka? Write a letter to Dr. Wolff in Kafka's voice, advising him what to tell his cousin.

TEXTS IN CONTEXT

The Metamorphosis and the Modernist Vision

"Make it new!" — an exhortation poet Ezra Pound made in 1928 — has since become the battle cry of what we now refer to as the modernist movement. Although it is difficult to point to an actual date when the period began, the turn of the twentieth century saw a dramatic series of culture shocks that brought about changes in every sphere. Industrialization that shifted demographics from the country to the city, rapid social and political change, and advances in science and technology had exerted a profound influence by the early 1900s.

Usually dated by the reign of Britain's Queen Victoria (1837–1901), the Victorian age saw many advances in medical, scientific, and technological knowledge as well as rapid industrialization and a boom in urban populations. The late Victorian era in particular was characterized by European imperial expansion, mainly into Africa and Asia, spurred by nationalistic pride. This struggle for power among European nations colonizing other continents placed an increasing strain on diplomatic relations, creating tension that would eventually lead to open conflict.

Victoria's reign also saw the rise of socialism, liberalism, and organized feminism — all challenges to long-established western European social, economic, and political systems. While other European countries, including France and Italy, experienced a series of political revolutions in the mid-nineteenth century, Britain's political landscape shifted toward popular democracy as voting rights expanded incrementally; by 1884, men had attained near-universal suffrage. At the turn of the century, much of the western world was wrestling with groundbreaking ideas of the late 1800s: Sigmund Freud's notion of the unconscious mind (the id), Karl Marx's socialism, Charles Darwin's theory of natural selection, and Friedrich Nietzsche's nihilist mantra — "God is

Underwood Archives/UIG/Bridgeman Images

Industrialization during the nineteenth century spurred rapid urban expansion. Its effects are evident in the above photograph, taken in 1900, which shows laundry hung out to dry in a Manhattan tenement. **What does the physical landscape of the city, as seen here, suggest about the psychological environment for urban residents?**

dead" — that reflected a growing secularization in society.

Perhaps the most destabilizing influence during the early twentieth century was World War I. One of the bloodiest wars in recorded history, and the first to play out on a global scale, it introduced a deadly combination of primitive trench-warfare tactics and modern weaponry — by its finish, nearly 9 million people had died. It was also one of the most politically bewildering conflicts the world had ever seen. Though it began as a struggle between the Austro-Hungarian Empire and Serbia, a tangled web of alliances quickly dragged Russia, Great Britain, France, Germany, Italy, the Ottoman Empire, Japan, Bulgaria, and ultimately the United States into the fray. For many, the death and destruction of the Great War that ravaged Europe from 1914 to 1918 raised doubts about widely accepted beliefs in science, politics, and religion. The technological advances made possible by industrialization had produced deadly weapons that caused destruction on a previously unimaginable scale; imperialist policies and nationalistic fervor had led to irreparable global conflict. Faith in the established political and social order of the Victorian era dwindled.

Private Collection / Archives Charmet / Bridgeman Images

This image shows the ruins of the French city of Verdun after eight months of bombardment from the German and French armies. The Battle of Verdun was one of World War I's longest and bloodiest battles, lasting from February 21 to December 18, 1916. **How might this devastation have prompted a desire not simply to rebuild what was destroyed but to rethink a way of life or values?**

This general uncertainty about the nature of reality contributed to a growing sense of alienation and fragmentation in the wake of World War I. Artists, musicians, and writers made a radical break with the past and sought new ways to interpret the now-unfamiliar world they confronted. Many rejected the so-called "realistic" depiction of human experience in both the written and visual arts of the nineteenth century. Traditional art forms suddenly seemed incapable of representing the mystery, complexity, and uncertainty of modern life.

Many cite the 1913 Armory Show, the first large exhibition of modern art in America, as the start of the modernist movement. The three-city exhibition started in New York City's 69th Regiment Armory, then went on to Chicago and Boston. It featured the works of European modern artists — including Henri Matisse, Marcel Duchamp, and Pablo Picasso — and the show shocked many Americans who, accustomed to realistic art, were perplexed by experimental and abstract expression.

Modernism is now known for its abstract art, symbolic poetry, and stream-of-consciousness prose — all meant to represent the subjective experience of modern life

rather than the objective reality of it. These efforts were driven by innovation in form and content. Although both writers and visual artists experimented in many different forms, the modernists' vision shares certain characteristics:

- a belief that traditional religious and social institutions such as the family had broken down;
- a view of urban society as fostering a mechanistic, materialistic culture;
- a sense of anonymity and alienation brought on, in part, by the banality of bourgeois life; and
- a conviction that there is no such thing as absolute truth, only relative and subjective perceptions.

While these ideas may seem to add up to a fairly bleak view, modernists believed that their willingness to innovate, to "make it new," and to experiment with forms more attuned to the social and political realities of the era could be a transformative, even healing experience. Writers, for instance, emphasized and validated the individual's perception of reality, often exploring characters' rich inner lives through the stream-of-consciousness narrative technique. This method of narration describes in words the flow of thoughts in the minds of the characters. Writers such as James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, Jean Toomer, and William Faulkner used stream of consciousness to paint characters' perceptions and observations as elements that propel the narrative forward through association rather than causality.

Modernist writers and artists often found the collage a mode of expression suited to their philosophical beliefs. In visual art, a collage is a work created by materials and objects glued to a flat surface. In poetry, this technique is called fragmentation, where diverse pieces or images come together — or don't — in a way that mirrors the disjointed, chaotic modern world. In both cases, the collage abandons the logical relationships that typically order a work of art — such as cause-and-effect, chronology, and subordination — to express a less coherent view of reality, one that highlights subjective individual experience. The poet Ezra Pound coined the term "imagism" to characterize an early twentieth century style of poetry that sought to replace the abstract, often decorative language of the nineteenth century with clear, concise, concrete images. Pound's famous two-line poem, "In a Station of the Metro," epitomized the tenets of this movement:

> The apparition of these faces in the crowd :
> Petals on a wet, black bough .

Pound observes a scene in the subway, then recasts — and elevates — it as a powerful image. Such overall economy of language, apt metaphors, and precisely observed detail were what imagist poets like Ezra Pound, H. D., Richard Aldington, William Carlos Williams, and Amy Lowell strove to create.

Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, written in 1912 and published in 1915, is a work forever poised on the cusp of modernism. In this section, you will consider the novella in the context of other literature and art from approximately the same period. You'll have an opportunity to see how others interpret the dictum to "make it new" as well as how each writer and artist builds on the traditions and conventions of the past. We begin with an excerpt from a famous essay called "Tradition and the Individual Talent" by T. S. Eliot. In it,

he argues against rejecting the past but instead urges his audience to redefine the relationship between past and present.

TEXTS IN CONTEXT

T. S. Eliot / from *Tradition and the Individual Talent* (nonfiction)
Otto Dix / *Der Krieg* ("The War") (painting)
Robert Burns / *A Red, Red Rose* and **H. D.** / *Sea Rose* (poetry)
Amy Lowell / *A London Thoroughfare. 2 A.M.* and *The Emperor's Garden* (poetry)
Fernand Léger / *La Ville* ("The City") (painting)
T. S. Eliot / *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* (poetry)
Virginia Woolf / from *Mrs. Dalloway* (fiction)

from Tradition and the Individual Talent

T. S. ELIOT

Poet, dramatist, and critic Thomas Stearns Eliot (1888–1965) was born and raised in St. Louis, Missouri. He moved to England when he was twenty-five to attend Oxford University after studying at Harvard University and eventually became a British subject. His most famous works include "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" (1915), "The Wasteland" (1922), "Ash Wednesday" (1930), "Burnt Norton" (1941), "Little Gidding" (1942), "Four Quartets" (1943), and the play *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935). He was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1948. Eliot is considered one of the great poetic innovators of the twentieth century and is closely associated with the modernist movement — especially in his stream-of-consciousness style steeped in literary allusions and mythological references. Eliot believed that such complex poetry was necessary in order to reflect the complexities of modern civilization, but he also considered tradition to be an ongoing process that united the past with the present. His essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent" explores the complex relationship between a poet's historical context and the value of that poet's unique voice.

In English writing we seldom speak of tradition, though we occasionally apply its name in deploring its absence. We cannot refer to "the tradition" or to "a tradition"; at most, we employ the adjective in saying that the poetry of So-and-so is "traditional" or even "too traditional." Seldom, perhaps, does the word appear except in a phrase of censure. . . .

[W]hen we praise a poet, upon those aspects of his work in which he least resembles anyone else. In these aspects or parts of his work we pretend to find what is individual, what is the peculiar essence of the man. We dwell with satisfaction upon the poet's difference from his predecessors, especially his immediate predecessors; we endeavour to find something that can be isolated in order to be enjoyed. Whereas if we approach a poet without this prejudice we shall often find that not only the best, but the most individual parts of his work may be those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously. And I do not mean the impressionable period of adolescence, but the period of full maturity.

Yet if the only form of tradition, of handing down, consisted in following the ways of the

immediate generation before us in a blind or timid adherence to its successes, "tradition" should positively be discouraged. We have seen many such simple currents soon lost in the sand; and novelty is better than repetition. Tradition is a matter of much wider significance. It cannot be inherited, and if you want it you must obtain it by great labour. It involves, in the first place, the historical sense, which we may call nearly indispensable to anyone who would continue to be a poet beyond his twenty-fifth year; and the historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence; the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order. This historical sense, which is a sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal together, is what makes a writer traditional. And it is at the same time what makes a writer most acutely conscious of his place in time, of his contemporaneity.

No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists. You cannot value him alone; you must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead.

[1920]

QUESTIONS

1. How does T. S. Eliot's concept of "tradition" fuse past and present?
2. How does he challenge the view that the value of a work of art should be measured by its departure from its predecessors?
3. To what extent does the final paragraph of this excerpt argue that an artist must pay tribute — either by reflecting or refuting — the ideas of his or her predecessors?
4. How does Eliot's concept of the presence of the past apply to musical artists? Choose a musician or band, contemporary or past, with whom you are familiar, and discuss.

Der Krieg ("The War")

OTTO DIX

Otto Dix (1891–1969) was a German artist known for his vivid depictions of the brutality of war. Dix volunteered as a machine-gunner during World War I and was sent to the Western Front in the autumn of 1915. He was at the Battle of the Somme in France, one of the bloodiest in military history. After the war, Dix taught at Dresden Academy. His paintings, done in the modernist style called German expressionism, reflected the horror of his war experiences. When the Nazis came to power in the early 1930s, they viewed his work as detrimental to the rise of militarism; thus, he was dismissed from his teaching position and denigrated in the German press. Some of his paintings were destroyed; other works, hidden away, have only recently been rediscovered. After being conscripted into the German national militia near the end of World War II, Dix was captured by French troops and held until February of 1946. He later returned to Germany, where his reputation as an artist was restored, and continued to create antiwar paintings until his death in 1969. The following triptych of paintings, titled *Der Krieg* ("The War"), is the culmination of a portfolio of antiwar paintings and drawings completed between 1924 and 1932.

[1932]

QUESTIONS

1. Although the paintings are not entirely representational, there are several recognizable elements. What are they? Be very specific in identifying the images — both figures and the setting — that make up this triptych.
2. What elements of deliberate distortion do you see in the paintings? How effective is this technique in comparison to more realistic depictions of wartime scenes?
3. How do the color and composition of the paintings contribute to their hallucinatory, nightmarish quality?
4. What details of these paintings support the argument that Otto Dix depicts the depravity and barbarity of war in the early twentieth century?
5. What narrative do these panels seem to tell? Do these images add up to a coherent, linear storyline? Consider the way Dix handles time: do these panels follow a chronology or conflate different times?
6. Although Dix's *Der Krieg* specifically depicts the trench warfare of World War I, it has been seen as one of the most powerful indictments of war in general. To what extent is it still relevant to contemporary conflicts? Explain, using details from the triptych.

A Red, Red Rose

ROBERT BURNS

Robert Burns (1759–1796) was a poet and lyricist who remains a folk hero in his native Scotland to this day. Burns often wrote in the Scottish dialect, and his song "Auld Lang Syne" still commemorates the end of the calendar year in many places throughout the world. His most famous poem, "A Red, Red Rose," also became a popular ballad. In it, Burns describes a rose as a symbol of romantic love and beauty, a traditional treatment of the flower. For centuries before and since, a rose tended either to represent a speaker's beloved and his passion for her, or recalled the Virgin Mary's purity in Christian theology. "A Red, Red Rose" typifies the kind of conventional interpretation of symbol that modernist poets would later question and subvert.

O my luve's like a red, red rose
That's newly sprung in June;
O my luve's like the melodie
That's sweetly play'd in tune.

As fair art thou, my bonie lass,
So deep in luve am I;
And I will luve thee still, my dear,
Till a' the seas gang dry.

Till a' the seas gang dry, my dear.
And the rocks melt wi' the sun:
O I will love thee still, my dear,
While the sands o' life shall run.

And fare-thee-weel, my only luve:
And fare-thee-weel awhile!
And I will come again, my luve,
Tho' 'twere ten thousand mile!

O my luve's like a red, red rose
That's newly sprung in June;
O my luve's like the melodie
That's sweetly play'd in tune.

[1794]

QUESTIONS

1. What tone does the opening simile establish?
2. What other similes accumulate during the poem to support and enhance the opening one?
3. As a twenty-first–century reader, which of these similes do you find the most original and moving? Why?
4. Do you believe that relying upon the rose's traditional associations increases or decreases its symbolic value? Explain.

Sea Rose

H. D.

H. D. (1886–1961), pen name of Hilda Doolittle, was an influential American poet and novelist known for her association with imagism, a modernist literary movement that came to prominence in the early twentieth century. Imagists rejected overly sentimental, decorative language in favor of direct and succinct expression. Such poets often focused an entire poem on a single image, as H.D. does in the following poem, "Sea Rose." This poem undermines the stereotype of roses as symbols of beauty, romance, and purity by framing the image in concrete, unsentimental terms that renew its power.

Rose, harsh rose,
marred and with stint of petals,
meagre flower, thin,
sparse of leaf,

more precious
than a wet rose
single on a stem —
you are caught in the drift.

Stunted, with small leaf,
you are flung on the sand,
you are lifted
in the crisp sand
that drives in the wind.

Can the spice-rose
drip such acrid fragrance
hardened in a leaf?

[1916]

QUESTIONS

1. In what ways does the opening stanza (ll. 1–4) defy our expectations based on the traditional way of seeing and writing about a rose? Cite specific language choices.
2. Who is the speaker in this poem? Who (or what) is being addressed?
3. How do you interpret the line, "you are caught in the drift" (l. 8)?
4. What is the impact of comparing the sea rose to two other roses? How does the sea rose compare?
5. What do you think the speaker anticipates as the response to the poem's final rhetorical question (ll. 14–16)?
6. What is the effect of the sparse, perhaps even stark, language of the poem? What is the difference, for instance, between "flung on the sand" and "flung harshly on the cold sand"?
7. Do you think the sea rose, as depicted in this poem, is beautiful? Why or why not?
8. What does the sea rose symbolize in this poem? In what ways does it both evoke and subvert traditional associations with the rose?

A London Thoroughfare. 2 A.M. and The Emperor's Garden

AMY LOWELL

Amy Lowell (1874–1925) was an American poet from Brookline, Massachusetts. She was born into a prominent family, sister to the astronomer Percival Lowell and Harvard president Abbott Lawrence Lowell. As a poet, Lowell was an early advocate for free verse and eventually embraced the imagist movement, which favored direct expression over decorative language. Lowell published eight collections of poetry in her lifetime, and three more were published after her death at age fifty-one, including *What's O'Clock*, for which she was posthumously awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 1926. In both "A London Thoroughfare. 2 A.M." and "The Emperor's Garden," Lowell blends unsentimental and blunt language with vivid imagery to evoke the alienating forces of modernity.

A London Thoroughfare. 2 A.M.

They have watered the street,
It shines in the glare of lamps,
Cold, white lamps,
And lies
Like a slow-moving river,
Barred with silver and black.
Cabs go down it,
One,
And then another.
Between them I hear the shuffling of feet.
Tramps doze on the window-ledges,
Night-walkers pass along the sidewalks.
The city is squalid and sinister,
With the silver-barred street in the midst,
Slow-moving,
A river leading nowhere.

Opposite my window,
The moon cuts,
Clear and round,
Through the plum-coloured night.
She cannot light the city;
It is too bright.
It has white lamps,
And glitters coldly.

I stand in the window and watch the moon.
She is thin and lustreless,
But I love her.
I know the moon,
And this is an alien city.

[1914]

The Emperor's Garden

Once, in the sultry heats of midsummer,
An emperor caused the miniature mountains in
his garden
To be covered with white silk,
That so crowned
They might cool his eyes
With the sparkle of snow.

[1917]

QUESTIONS

1. How would you characterize the speaker of "A London Thoroughfare. 2 A.M."? How does she depict the city? Does she use primarily literal or figurative language? Cite examples to support your response.
2. Where does a shift occur in "A London Thoroughfare. 2 A.M."? What is the relationship between what happens before and after that shift?
3. Summarize the poem "The Emperor's Garden." To what extent do you think your summary captures Amy Lowell's purpose or ideas?
4. How does Lowell appeal to the senses in "The Emperor's Garden"? Cite specific words and images.
5. Add at least five of the following modifiers to "The Emperor's Garden": *sweltering, falling, gentle, sparkling, deep blue, bright, wise, sensuous.* How do these additional descriptions change the effect the poem has on you?
6. Lowell believed that "concentration is of the very essence of poetry" and strove to "produce poetry that is hard and clear, never blurred nor indefinite." Based on these two poems, explain why you believe she did or did not imbue her own work with these qualities.
7. Judging from these examples, is it more important to feel or to understand imagist poetry — or is that a false dichotomy? Can one response to art exist without the other? Explain.

La Ville ("The City")

FERNAND LÉGER

Fernand Léger (1881–1955) was a French painter and sculptor. He was born in Normandy to farmers and served on the front lines for the French army during World War I. Like many artists associated with the modernist movement, Léger's work blended abstract and recognizable figures to evoke the great changes wrought by urbanization, the first World War, and the increasing speed and apparent chaos of modern life. While Léger embraced recognizable subject matter later in his career, he also experimented with bold primary colors and geometric shapes to render it unfamiliar. In his famous painting, *La Ville* ("The City"), Léger reflects the vivid but disorienting and claustrophobic feeling of urban spaces in the early twentieth century.

The Philadelphia Museum of Art / Art Resource, NY

[1919]

QUESTIONS

1. What elements of urban life can you discern in this painting?
2. How do the colors and geometric patterns in this painting capture the artist's sense of movement in the city?
3. What do the broken texts and images suggest about the artist's perception of urban spaces?
4. One critic described this painting as a "utopian billboard for machine-age urban life." What elements of the work might support such an interpretation?
5. On the next page is a cityscape painted in 1877 by Gustave Caillebotte entitled *Paris Street; Rainy Day*. It exemplifies the type of realistic work that Fernand Léger believed no longer accurately portrayed urban life. How does it contrast with the cityscape of *La Ville*? Consider the geometry that structures the paintings, the figures, and the viewer's perspective in both works.

Gustave Caillebotte, French, 1848–1894, Paris Street; Rainy Day, 1877, Oil on canvas, 212.2 × 276.2 cm (83 1/2 × 108 3/4 in.), Charles H. and Mary F. S. Worcester Collection, 1964.336, The Art Institute of Chicago

The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock

T. S. ELIOT

Poet, dramatist, and critic Thomas Stearns Eliot (1888–1965) was born and raised in St. Louis, Missouri. He moved to England when he was twenty-five to attend Oxford University after studying at Harvard University and eventually became a British subject. His most famous works include "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" (1915), "The Wasteland" (1922), "Ash Wednesday" (1930), "Burnt Norton" (1941), "Little Gidding" (1942), "Four Quartets" (1943), and the play *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935). He was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1948. Eliot is considered one of the great poetic innovators of the twentieth century and is closely associated with the modernist movement — especially in his use of stream of consciousness, a technique he employs in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" to depict a speaker wandering through the streets of a city on a foggy night. Eliot did not compromise when it came to the language of poetry, believing that it should represent the complexities of modern civilization. "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," a poem begun when Eliot was a college student and published when he was twenty-eight, is considered one of those works that epitomize the cultural significance of poetry.

S'io credesse che mia risposta fosse
A persona che mai tornasse al mondo,
Questa fiamma staria senza più scosse.
Ma perciocchè giammai di questo fondo

Non tornò vivo alcun, s'i'odo il vero,
Senza tema d'infamia ti rispondo. [1]

Let us go then, you and I,
When the evening is spread out against the sky
Like a patient etherized upon a table;
Let us go, through certain half-deserted streets,
The muttering retreats
Of restless nights in one-night cheap hotels
And sawdust restaurants with oyster-shells:
Streets that follow like a tedious argument
Of insidious intent
To lead you to an overwhelming question . . .
Oh, do not ask, "What is it?"
Let us go and make our visit.

In the room the women come and go
Talking of Michelangelo.

The yellow fog that rubs its back upon the window-panes,
The yellow smoke that rubs its muzzle on the window-panes
Licked its tongue into the corners of the evening,
Lingered upon the pools that stand in drains,
Let fall upon its back the soot that falls from chimneys,
Slipped by the terrace, made a sudden leap,
And seeing that it was a soft October night,
Curled once about the house, and fell asleep.

And indeed there will be time
For the yellow smoke that slides along the street,
Rubbing its back upon the window-panes;
There will be time, there will be time
To prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet;
There will be time to murder and create,
And time for all the works and days of hands[2]
That lift and drop a question on your plate:
Time for you and time for me,
And time yet for a hundred indecisions,
And for a hundred visions and revisions,
Before the taking of a toast and tea.

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[1] From Dante's *Inferno*, canto XXVII, 61–66. The words are spoken by Guido da Montefeltro, who was condemned to hell for providing false counsel to Pope Boniface VII. When asked to identify himself, Guido responded, "If I thought my answers were given to anyone who could ever return to the world, this flame would shake no more; but since none ever did return above from this depth, if what I hear is true, without fear of infamy I answer thee." He does not know that Dante will return to earth to report on what he has seen and heard. — EDS.

[2] Reference to the title of a poem about agricultural life by the early Greek poet Hesiod. — EDS.

In the room the women come and go
Talking of Michelangelo.

And indeed there will be time
To wonder, "Do I dare?" and, "Do I dare?"
Time to turn back and descend the stair,
With a bald spot in the middle of my hair —

[They will say: "How his hair is growing thin!"]
My morning coat, my collar mounting firmly to the chin,
My necktie rich and modest, but asserted by a simple pin —
[They will say: "But how his arms and legs are thin!"]
Do I dare
Disturb the universe?
In a minute there is time
For decisions and revisions which a minute will reverse.

For I have known them all already, known them all:
Have known the evenings, mornings, afternoons,
I have measured out my life with coffee spoons;
I know the voices dying with a dying fall
Beneath the music from a farther room.
So how should I presume?

And I have known the eyes already, known them all —
The eyes that fix you in a formulated phrase.
And when I am formulated, sprawling on a pin,
When I am pinned and wriggling on the wall,
Then how should I begin
To spit out all the butt-ends of my days and ways?
And how should I presume?

And I have known the arms already, known them all —
Arms that are braceleted and white and bare
[But in the lamplight, downed with light brown hair!]
Is it perfume from a dress
That makes me so digress?
Arms that lie along a table, or wrap about a shawl.
And should I then presume?
And how should I begin?

Shall I say, I have gone at dusk through narrow streets,
And watched the smoke that rises from the pipes
Of lonely men in shirt-sleeves, leaning out of windows? . . .

. . . . .

I should have been a pair of ragged claws
Scuttling across the floors of silent seas.

And the afternoon, the evening, sleeps so peacefully!
Smoothed by long fingers,
Asleep . . . tired . . . or it malingers,
Stretched on the floor, here beside you and me.
Should I, after tea and cakes and ices,
Have the strength to force the moment to its crisis?
But though I have wept and fasted, wept and prayed,
Though I have seen my head (grown slightly bald) brought in upon a platter,[3]
I am no prophet — and here's no great matter;
I have seen the moment of my greatness flicker,
And I have seen the eternal Footman hold my coat, and snicker,
And in short, I was afraid.

And would it have been worth it, after all,
After the cups, the marmalade, the tea,
Among the porcelain, among some talk of you and me,
Would it have been worth while
To have bitten off the matter with a smile,
To have squeezed the universe into a ball
To roll it toward some overwhelming question,
To say: "I am Lazarus,[4] come from the dead,
Come back to tell you all, I shall tell you all" —
If one, settling a pillow by her head,
    Should say: "That is not what I meant at all.
    That is not it, at all."

And would it have been worth it, after all,
Would it have been worth while,
After the sunsets and the dooryards and the sprinkled streets,
After the novels, after the teacups, after the skirts that trail along the floor —
And this, and so much more? —
It is impossible to say just what I mean!
But as if a magic lantern threw the nerves in patterns on a screen:
Would it have been worth while
If one, settling a pillow or throwing off a shawl,
And turning toward the window, should say:
    "That is not it at all,
    That is not what I meant, at all."

. . . . .

[3] From Matthew 14:1–11. King Herod ordered the beheading of John the Baptist at the request of Herod's wife and daughter. — EDS.
[4] From John 11:1–44. Lazarus was raised from the dead by Jesus. — EDS.

No! I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be;
Am an attendant lord, one that will do
To swell a progress, start a scene or two,
Advise the prince: no doubt, an easy tool,
Deferential, glad to be of use,
Politic, cautious, and meticulous;
Full of high sentence, but a bit obtuse;
At times, indeed, almost ridiculous —
Almost, at times, the Fool.
I grow old . . . I grow old . . .
I shall wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled.

Shall I part my hair behind? Do I dare to eat a peach?

I shall wear white flannel trousers, and walk upon the beach.
I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each.

I do not think that they will sing to me.

I have seen them riding seaward on the waves
Combing the white hair of the waves blown back
When the wind blows the water white and black.
We have lingered in the chambers of the sea
By sea-girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown
Till human voices wake us, and we drown.

[1917]

QUESTIONS

1. We can assume that the speaker of the poem is Prufrock. What kind of person is he? Try to describe him in three or four words. What qualities of his character do you think he unknowingly reveals through his perceptions and observations?
2. How does T. S. Eliot set the tone in the poem's first stanza? Look carefully at both the figurative language and concrete details.
3. The "yellow fog" that is the subject of the poem's third stanza has the qualities of a cat. Is this association threatening, comforting, or both? How does your interpretation of the fog affect your reading of the poem as a whole?
4. You may notice that the images are arranged from top to bottom — the description goes from the sky to the streets in the opening stanza and progresses from the windowpanes to the drains in the third. What is the effect of the way Eliot's speaker, Prufrock, guides the reader's eye and imagination?
5. The middle section of the poem (ll. 37–86) moves from the chaotic city setting into the fragmented, anxiety-ridden mind of the speaker. How is Prufrock's physical description developed in lines 37–44? How do his physical characteristics connect to his emotional state?
6. In what ways is "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" a poem about time? Read through the text and look for references to time — particularly aging, the meaning of time, and the word *time* itself. What might Eliot be asserting or questioning about the meaning of time?
7. How does this poem reflect modernist concerns about the loss of emotional connections and alienation? To what extent does Eliot explore the reasons why such estrangement occurs? To what extent does he offer a solution?

from Mrs. Dalloway

VIRGINIA WOOLF

Virginia Woolf (1882–1941) was a renowned novelist, critic, and essayist closely associated with the modernist movement. Her most famous works are the novels *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) and *To the Lighthouse* (1927), and also many nonfiction essays, including *A Room of One's Own* (1929). In *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf experiments with stream of consciousness, the quintessential modernist narrative mode also used by T. S. Eliot, James Joyce, Henry James, and others. In the following excerpt from the opening of *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf takes the reader into the mind of Clarissa Dalloway, an upper-class British woman planning a dinner party against the backdrop of the profound losses England suffered in World War I.

Mrs. Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself.

For Lucy had her work cut out for her. The doors would be taken off their hinges; Rumpelmayer's men were coming. And then, thought Clarissa Dalloway, what a morning — fresh as if issued to children on a beach.

What a lark! What a plunge! For so it had always seemed to her, when, with a little squeak of the hinges, which she could hear now, she had burst open the French windows and plunged at Bourton into the open air. How fresh, how calm, stiller than this of course, the air was in the early morning; like the flap of a wave; the kiss of a wave; chill and sharp and yet (for a girl of eighteen as she then was) solemn, feeling as she did, standing there at the open window, that something awful was about to happen; looking at the flowers, at the trees with the smoke winding off them and the rooks rising, falling; standing and looking until Peter Walsh said, "Musing among the vegetables?" — was that it? — "I prefer men to cauliflowers" — was that it? He must have said it at breakfast one morning when she had gone out on to the terrace — Peter Walsh. He would be back from India one of these days, June or July, she forgot which, for his letters were awfully dull; it was his sayings one remembered; his eyes, his pocket-knife, his smile, his grumpiness and, when millions of things had utterly vanished — how strange it was! — a few sayings like this about cabbages.

She stiffened a little on the kerb, waiting for Durtnall's van to pass. A charming woman, Scrope Purvis thought her (knowing her as one does know people who live next door to one in Westminster); a touch of the bird about her, of the jay, blue-green, light, vivacious, though she was over fifty, and grown very white since her illness. There she perched, never seeing him, waiting to cross, very upright.

For having lived in Westminster — how many years now? over twenty, — one feels even in the midst of the traffic, or waking at night, Clarissa was positive, a particular hush, or solemnity; an indescribable pause; a suspense (but that might be her heart, affected, they said, by influenza) before Big Ben strikes. There! Out it boomed. First a warning, musical; then the hour, irrevocable. The leaden circles dissolved in the air. Such fools we are, she thought, crossing Victoria Street. For Heaven only knows why one loves it so, how one sees it so, making it up, building it round one, tumbling it, creating it every moment afresh; but the veriest frumps, the most dejected of miseries sitting on doorsteps (drink their downfall) do the same; can't be dealt with, she felt positive, by Acts of Parliament for that very reason: they love life. In people's eyes, in the swing, tramp, and trudge; in the bellow and the uproar; the carriages, motor cars, omnibuses,

vans, sandwich men shuffling and swinging; brass bands; barrel organs; in the triumph and the jingle and the strange high singing of some aeroplane overhead was what she loved; life; London; this moment of June.

For it was the middle of June. The War was over, except for some one like Mrs. Foxcroft at the Embassy last night eating her heart out because that nice boy was killed and now the old Manor House must go to a cousin; or Lady Bexborough who opened a bazaar, they said, with the telegram in her hand, John, her favourite, killed; but it was over; thank Heaven — over. It was June. The King and Queen were at the Palace. And everywhere, though it was still so early, there was a beating, a stirring of galloping ponies, tapping of cricket bats; Lords, Ascot, Ranelagh and all the rest of it; wrapped in the soft mesh of the grey-blue morning air, which, as the day wore on, would unwind them, and set down on their lawns and pitches the bouncing ponies, whose forefeet just struck the ground and up they sprung, the whirling young men, and laughing girls in their transparent muslins who, even now, after dancing all night, were taking their absurd woolly dogs for a run; and even now, at this hour, discreet old dowagers were shooting out in their motor cars on errands of mystery; and the shopkeepers were fidgeting in their windows with their paste and diamonds, their lovely old sea-green brooches in eighteenth-century settings to tempt Americans (but one must economise, not buy things rashly for Elizabeth), and she, too, loving it as she did with an absurd and faithful passion, being part of it, since her people were courtiers once in the time of the Georges, she, too, was going that very night to kindle and illuminate; to give her party. But how strange, on entering the Park, the silence; the mist; the hum; the slow-swimming happy ducks; the pouched birds waddling; and who should be coming along with his back against the Government buildings, most appropriately, carrying a despatch box stamped with the Royal Arms, who but Hugh Whitbread; her old friend Hugh — the admirable Hugh!

"Good-morning to you, Clarissa!" said Hugh, rather extravagantly, for they had known each other as children. "Where are you off to?"

"I love walking in London," said Mrs. Dalloway. "Really it's better than walking in the country."

[1925]

QUESTIONS

1. *Mrs. Dalloway* is set in London, which is the focus of this opening section. How does Clarissa feel about the city? Cite specific words and passages to support your response.
2. Where does Virginia Woolf conflate or shift between the past and the present in this passage? What is the effect of these conflations and shifts?
3. What is the purpose of the conflicting emotions and contradictory actions in this passage? Identify two and discuss their effect.
4. Woolf intended to write a novel that underscored the profound change in life after World War I. How does the style of this passage make the reader experience the dislocation and disruption that the author believed characterized post–World War I London?

LITERATURE IN CONVERSATION
The Metamorphosis and the Modernist Vision

1. In what ways is *The Metamorphosis* by Franz Kafka a modernist work? Consider how it embodies some of the characteristics of this movement as well as ways in which its style and structure might prefigure later works like *Mrs. Dalloway*.
2. Modernism is, in many ways, a reaction to and preoccupation with the impact urbanization had on traditional beliefs and human relationships. Discuss how urban life is depicted in both *The Metamorphosis* and at least one other work from these Texts in Context.
3. In the introduction to this section, we discussed the collage as a form modernists used to capture the fragmentation of life in the early twentieth century. Discuss how at least two of these works might be seen as "collages," either visual or written.
4. In their effort to "make it new" and reveal the fissures of life in the early twentieth century, do the artists you've explored — including Kafka — present a bleak view of life in an age of rapid change, a hopeful perspective that results from facing change and trauma, or a little of both? In short, is modernism primarily optimistic or pessimistic? Consider at least two texts in your response.
5. Research another element of or influence on the modernist movement, such as cubism, Sigmund Freud's work on the impact of the unconscious, Albert Einstein's theory of relativity, composer Igor Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring*, or playwright Bertolt Brecht's *The Threepenny Opera*. What characteristics of modernism do they express?
6. *The Metamorphosis* and the texts in this section primarily represent European and American perspectives on early twentieth-century life, but the effects of modernism were global. Research one of the following writers and artists and discuss the form modernism takes in his or her work: Mexican poet Octavio Paz (1914–1998), Indian painters Amrita Sher-Gil (1913–1941) and Jamini Roy (1887–1972), Russian poet Anna Akhmatova (1889–1966), Martinique poet Aimé Césaire (1913–2008), Japanese novelist Jun'ichirō Tanizaki (1886–1965), and Japanese poet Chika Sagawa (1911–1936).

FICTION

I Stand Here Ironing

TILLIE OLSEN

Tillie Olsen (1913–2007) was born in Nebraska, the daughter of Russian Jewish immigrants. Her parents were active socialists who fled Russia after the attempted revolution of 1905. She recalled, "It was a rich childhood from the standpoint of ideas." She attended high school but abandoned formal education after the eleventh grade. Later in life, as an influential writer, she received nine honorary degrees from colleges and universities. Political activism and responsibilities as a wife and mother made Olsen's writing sporadic. She published *Tell Me a Riddle* (1961), a series of four interconnected stories (the first of which is "I Stand Here Ironing"), *Yonnondio: From the Thirties* (1974), and *Silences* (1978), a nonfiction work about her life and the obstacles to writing that caused her own silences. Olsen was influential in the founding of the Feminist Press in 1970. Later work included *Mother to Daughter, Daughter to Mother, Mothers on Mothering: A Daybook and Reader* (1984), and *Mothers and Daughters: That Special Quality: An Exploration in Photographs* (1987). Perhaps her most famous story, "I Stand Here Ironing" focuses on the struggle of a working-class mother.

I stand here ironing, and what you asked me moves tormented back and forth with the iron.

"I wish you would manage the time to come in and talk with me about your daughter. I'm sure you can help me understand her. She's a youngster who needs help and whom I'm deeply interested in helping."

"Who needs help." . . . Even if I came, what good would it do? You think because I am her mother I have a key, or that in some way you could use me as a key? She has lived for nineteen years. There is all that life that has happened outside of me, beyond me.

And when is there time to remember, to sift, to weigh, to estimate, to total? I will start and there will be an interruption and I will have to gather it all together again. Or I will become engulfed with all I did or did not do, with what should have been and what cannot be helped.

She was a beautiful baby. The first and only 5
one of our five that was beautiful at birth. You do not guess how new and uneasy her tenancy in her now-loveliness. You did not know her all those years she was thought homely, or see her poring over her baby pictures, making me tell her over and over how beautiful she had been — and would be, I would tell her — and was now, to the seeing eye. But the seeing eyes were few or nonexistent. Including mine.

I nursed her. They feel that's important nowadays, I nursed all the children, but with her, with all the fierce rigidity of first motherhood, I did like the books then said. Though her cries battered me to trembling and my breasts ached with swollenness, I waited till the clock decreed.

Why do I put that first? I do not even know if it matters, or if it explains anything.

She was a beautiful baby. She blew shining bubbles of sound. She loved motion, loved light,

loved color and music and textures. She would lie on the floor in her blue overalls patting the surface so hard in ecstasy her hands and feet would blur. She was a miracle to me, but when she was eight months old I had to leave her daytimes with the woman downstairs to whom she was no miracle at all, for I worked or looked for work and for Emily's father, who "could no longer endure" (he wrote in his good-bye note) "sharing want with us."

I was nineteen. It was the pre-relief, pre-WPA world of the depression. I would start running as soon as I got off the streetcar, running up the stairs, the place smelling sour, and awake or asleep to startle awake, when she saw me she would break into a clogged weeping that could not be comforted, a weeping I can hear yet.

After a while I found a job hashing at night so I could be with her days, and it was better. But it came to where I had to bring her to his family and leave her. 10

It took a long time to raise the money for her fare back. Then she got chicken pox and I had to wait longer. When she finally came, I hardly knew her, walking quick and nervous like her father, looking like her father, thin, and dressed in a shoddy red that yellowed her skin and glared at the pockmarks. All the baby loveliness gone.

She was two. Old enough for nursery school they said, and I did not know then what I know now — the fatigue of the long day, and the lacerations of group life in the kinds of nurseries that are only parking places for children.

Except that it would have made no difference if I had known. It was the only place there was. It was the only way we could be together, the only way I could hold a job.

And even without knowing, I knew. I knew the teacher that was evil because all these years it has curdled into my memory, the little boy hunched in the corner, her rasp, "why aren't you outside, because Alvin hits you? that's no reason, go out, scaredy." I knew Emily hated it even if she did not clutch and implore "don't go Mommy" like the other children, mornings.

She always had a reason why we should stay home. Momma, you look sick. Momma, I feel sick. Momma, the teachers aren't there today, they're sick. Momma, we can't go, there was a fire there last night. Momma, it's a holiday today, no school, they told me. But never a direct protest, never rebellion. 15

I think of our others in their three-, four-year-oldness — the explosions, the tempers, the denunciations, the demands — and I feel suddenly ill. I put the iron down. What in me demanded that goodness in her? And what was the cost, the cost to her of such goodness?

The old man living in the back once said in his gentle way: "You should smile at Emily more when you look at her." What *was* in my face when I looked at her? I loved her. There were all the acts of love.

It was only with the others I remembered what he said, and it was the face of joy, and not of care or tightness or worry I turned to them — too late for Emily. She does not smile easily, let alone almost always as her brothers and sisters do. Her face is closed and sombre, but when she wants, how fluid. You must have seen it in her pantomimes, you spoke of her rare gift for comedy on the stage that rouses laughter out of the audience so dear they applaud and applaud and do not want to let her go.

Where does it come from, that comedy? There was none of it in her when she came back to me that second time, after I had to send her away again. She had a new daddy now to learn to love, and I think perhaps it was a better time.

Except when we left her alone nights, telling ourselves she was old enough. 20

"Can't you go some other time, Mommy, like tomorrow?" she would ask. "Will it be just a little while you'll be gone? Do you promise?"

The time we came back, the front door open, the clock on the floor in the hall. She rigid

awake. "It wasn't just a little while. I didn't cry. Three times I called you, just three times, and then I ran downstairs to open the door so you could come faster. The clock talked loud. I threw it away, it scared me what it talked."

She said the clock talked loud again that night I went to the hospital to have Susan. She was delirious with the fever that comes before red measles, but she was fully conscious all the week I was gone and the week after we were home when she could not come near the new baby or me.

She did not get well. She stayed skeleton thin, not wanting to eat, and night after night she had nightmares. She would call for me, and I would rouse from exhaustion to sleepily call back: "You're all right, darling, go to sleep, it's just a dream," and if she still called, in a sterner voice, "now go to sleep, Emily, there's nothing to hurt you." Twice, only twice, when I had to get up for Susan anyhow, I went in to sit with her.

Now when it is too late (as if she would let me hold her and comfort her like I do the others) I get up and go to her at once at her moan or restless stirring. "Are you awake, Emily? Can I get you something?" And the answer is always the same: "No, I'm all right, go back to sleep, Mother." 25

They persuaded me at the clinic to send her away to a convalescent home in the country where "she can have the kind of food and care you can't manage for her, and you'll be free to concentrate on the new baby." They still send children to that place. I see pictures on the society page of sleek young women planning affairs to raise money for it, or dancing at the affairs, or decorating Easter eggs or filling Christmas stockings for the children.

They never have a picture of the children so I do not know if the girls still wear those gigantic red bows and the ravaged looks on the every other Sunday when parents can come to visit "unless otherwise notified" — as we were notified the first six weeks.

Oh it is a handsome place, green lawns and tall trees and fluted flower beds. High up on the balconies of each cottage the children stand, the girls in their red bows and white dresses, the boys in white suits and giant red ties. The parents stand below shrieking up to be heard and the children shriek down to be heard, and between them the invisible wall "Not To Be Contaminated by Parental Germs or Physical Affection."

There was a tiny girl who always stood hand in hand with Emily. Her parents never came. One visit she was gone. "They moved her to Rose Cottage," Emily shouted in explanation. "They don't like you to love anybody here."

She wrote once a week, the labored writing of a seven-year-old. "I am fine. How is the baby. If I write my leter nicly I will have a star. Love." There never was a star. We wrote every other day, letters she could never hold or keep but only hear read — once. "We simply do not have room for children to keep any personal possessions," they patiently explained when we pieced one Sunday's shrieking together to plead how much it would mean to Emily, who loved so to keep things, to be allowed to keep her letters and cards. 30

Each visit she looked frailer. "She isn't eating," they told us.

(They had runny eggs for breakfast or mush with lumps, Emily said later, I'd hold it in my mouth and not swallow. Nothing ever tasted good, just when they had chicken.)

It took us eight months to get her released home, and only the fact that she gained back so little of her seven lost pounds convinced the social worker.

I used to try to hold and love her after she came back, but her body would stay stiff, and after a while she'd push away. She ate little. Food sickened her, and I think much of life too. Oh she had physical lightness and brightness, twinkling by on skates, bouncing like a ball up and down up and down over the jump rope,

skimming over the hill; but these were momentary.

She fretted about her appearance, thin and dark and foreign-looking at a time when every little girl was supposed to look or thought she should look a chubby blonde replica of Shirley Temple. The doorbell sometimes rang for her, but no one seemed to come and play in the house or to be a best friend. Maybe because we moved so much. 35

There was a boy she loved painfully through two school semesters. Months later she told me how she had taken pennies from my purse to buy him candy. "Licorice was his favorite and I brought him some every day, but he still liked Jennifer better'n me. Why, Mommy?" The kind of question for which there is no answer.

School was a worry for her. She was not glib or quick in a world where glibness and quickness were easily confused with ability to learn. To her overworked and exasperated teachers she was an overconscientious "slow learner" who kept trying to catch up and was absent entirely too often.

I let her be absent, though sometimes the illness was imaginary. How different from my now-strictness about attendance with the others. I wasn't working. We had a new baby. I was home anyhow. Sometimes, after Susan grew old enough, I would keep her home from school, too, to have them all together.

Mostly Emily had asthma, and her breathing, harsh and labored, would fill the house with a curiously tranquil sound. I would bring the two old dresser mirrors and her boxes of collections to her bed. She would select beads and single earrings, bottle tops and shells, dried flowers and pebbles, old postcards and scraps, all sorts of oddments; then she and Susan would play Kingdom, setting up landscapes and furniture, peopling them with action.

Those were the only times of peaceful companionship between her and Susan. I have edged away from it, that poisonous feeling between them, that terrible balancing of hurts and needs I had to do between the two, and did so badly, those earlier years. 40

Oh there were conflicts between the others too, each one human, needing, demanding, hurting, taking — but only between Emily and Susan, no, Emily toward Susan that corroding resentment. It seems so obvious on the surface, yet it is not obvious; Susan, the second child, Susan, golden- and curly-haired and chubby, quick and articulate and assured, everything in appearance and manner Emily was not; Susan, not able to resist Emily's precious things, losing or sometimes clumsily breaking them; Susan telling jokes and riddles to company for applause while Emily sat silent (to say to me later: that was *my* riddle, Mother, I told it to Susan); Susan, who for all the five years' difference in age was just a year behind Emily in developing physically.

I am glad for that slow physical development that widened the difference between her and her contemporaries, though she suffered over it. She was too vulnerable for that terrible world of youthful competition, of preening and parading, of constant measuring of yourself against every other, of envy, "If I had that copper hair," "If I had that skin. . . ." She tormented herself enough about not looking like the others, there was enough of unsureness, the having to be conscious of words before you speak, the constant caring — what are they thinking of me? without having it all magnified by the merciless physical drives.

Ronnie is calling. He is wet and I change him. It is rare there is such a cry now. That time of motherhood is almost behind me when the ear is not one's own but must always be racked and listening for the child cry, the child call. We sit for a while and I hold him, looking out over the city spread in charcoal with its soft aisles of light. "*Shoogily*," he breathes and curls closer. I carry him back to bed, asleep. *Shoogily*. A funny word, a family word, inherited from Emily, invented by her to say: *comfort*.

In this and other ways she leaves her seal, I say aloud. And startle at my saying it. What do I mean? What did I start to gather together, to try and make coherent? I was at the terrible, growing years. War years. I do not remember them well. I was working, there were four smaller ones now, there was not time for her. She had to help be a mother, and housekeeper, and shopper. She had to get her seal. Mornings of crisis and near hysteria trying to get lunches packed, hair combed, coats and shoes found, everyone to school or Child Care on time, the baby ready for transportation. And always the paper scribbled on by a smaller one, the book looked at by Susan then mislaid, the homework not done. Running out to that huge school where she was one, she was lost, she was a drop; suffering over the unpreparedness, stammering and unsure in her classes.

There was so little time left at night after the kids were bedded down. She would struggle over books, always eating (it was in those years she developed her enormous appetite that is legendary in our family) and I would be ironing, or preparing food for the next day, or writing V-mail to Bill, or tending the baby. Sometimes, to make me laugh, or out of her despair, she would imitate happenings or types at school.

I think I said once: "Why don't you do something like this in the school amateur show?" One morning she phoned me at work, hardly understandable through the weeping: "Mother, I did it. I won, I won; they gave me first prize; they clapped and clapped and wouldn't let me go."

Now suddenly she was Somebody, and as imprisoned in her difference as she had been in anonymity.

She began to be asked to perform at other high schools, even in colleges, then at city and statewide affairs. The first one we went to, I only recognized her that first moment when thin, shy, she almost drowned herself into the curtains. Then: Was this Emily? The control, the command, the convulsing and deadly clowning, the spell, then the roaring, stamping audience, unwilling to let this rare and precious laughter out of their lives.

Afterwards: You ought to do something about her with a gift like that — but without money or knowing how, what does one do? We have left it all to her, and the gift has so often eddied inside, clogged and clotted, as been used and growing.

She is coming. She runs up the stairs two at a time with her light graceful step, and I know she is happy tonight. Whatever it was that occasioned your call did not happen today.

"Aren't you ever going to finish the ironing, Mother? Whistler painted his mother in a rocker. I'd have to paint mine standing over an ironing board." This is one of her communicative nights and she tells me everything and nothing as she fixes herself a plate of food out of the icebox.

She is so lovely. Why did you want me to come in at all? Why were you concerned? She will find her way.

She starts up the stairs to bed. "Don't get me up with the rest in the morning." "But I thought you were having midterms." "Oh, those," she comes back in, kisses me, and says quite lightly, "in a couple of years when we'll all be atom-dead they won't matter a bit."

She has said it before. She *believes* it. But because I have been dredging the past, and all that compounds a human being is so heavy and meaningful in me, I cannot endure it tonight.

I will never total it all. I will never come in to say: She was a child seldom smiled at. Her father left me before she was a year old. I had to work her first six years when there was work, or I sent her home and to his relatives. There were years she had care she hated. She was dark and thin and foreign-looking in a world where the prestige went to blondeness and curly hair and dimples, she was slow where glibness was prized. She was a child of anxious, not proud, love. We were poor and could not afford for her the soil of easy growth. I was a young mother,

I was a distracted mother. There were other children pushing up, demanding. Her younger sister seemed all that she was not. There were years she did not want me to touch her. She kept too much in herself, her life was such she had to keep too much in herself. My wisdom came too late. She has much to her and probably little will come of it. She is a child of her age, of depression, of war, of fear.

Let her be. So all that is in her will not bloom — but in how many does it? There is still enough left to live by. Only help her to know — help make it so there is cause for her to know — that she is more than this dress on the ironing board, helpless before the iron.

[1961]

EXPLORING THE TEXT

1. How is the setting of the story's frame, a woman standing at an ironing board, critical to the story's themes?
2. What structural purpose do the interruptions in the narrator's interior monologue serve in the story? For instance, "Ronnie is calling. He is wet and I change him" in paragraph 43. Notice, too, how the speaker's use of run-on sentences and made-up words — such as "four-year-oldness" (para. 16) — contrasts with short declarative sentences such as "She was a beautiful baby" (paras. 5 and 8), "I was nineteen" (para. 9), and "She was two" (para. 12). What is the effect of this juxtaposition?
3. The "you" the narrator addresses at the beginning of the story refers to a teacher concerned about Emily's welfare. At first the narrator seems somewhat defensive (as in the third paragraph, when she sarcastically responds to the teacher's request). How does the relationship between the narrator and the teacher evolve over the course of the story, so that by the end the narrator beseeches, "Only help her to know — help make it so there is cause for her to know" (para. 56)? To what extent might the narrator be addressing the reader as well as the teacher?
4. What do you make of the repeated references to quantitative matters in this story — for instance, "to sift, to weigh, to estimate, to total" in paragraph 4? Find other examples of this motif in the story, and explain its significance.
5. In the final lines of the story, the narrator calls her daughter "a child of her age, of depression, of war, of fear" (para. 55). How have historical events affected Emily's development? How have they imposed limitations on her? How have they made her strong?
6. Why does Tillie Olsen give us so much specific detail about Emily's appearance? How do these descriptions contribute to her characterization? How is her appearance related to the choices she makes to distinguish herself, to stand out? What does the narrator mean when she says of Emily, "Now suddenly she was Somebody, and as imprisoned in her difference as she had been in anonymity" (para. 47)?
7. What, finally, is the narrator's assessment of her own performance as a mother? Do you think she believes she has been a good mother to her children? Overall, is the story hopeful or hopeless?
8. Rarely do we hear Emily speak in this story. Instead, we hear others' comments about and reactions to her, including her mother's. How do you think Emily would characterize her relationship with her mother? Do you think she would blame her mother or circumstances beyond their control for the difficulties she has experienced?

The Moths

HELENA MARÍA VIRAMONTES

Helena María Viramontes (b. 1949) grew up as one of nine children in East Los Angeles. She has a BA from Immaculate Heart College, an MFA from the University of California, Irvine, and is currently a professor of English at Cornell University. Her mother's plight — raising nine children with a husband who "showed all that is bad in being male" — moved Helena to write of Chicana women's struggles. While writing for several underground literary publications, Viramontes published her first collection of short stories, *The Moths and Other Stories*, in 1985. In 1995, her first novel, *Under the Feet of Jesus*, was published, followed by *Their Dogs Came with Them* in 2007. The latter is her most ambitious work, drawing on her teenage years, the explosive decade of the 1960s, and the lives of young women coming of age at the height of *El Movimiento*, the fight for Latino civil rights in America. The story included here is the title piece from her 1985 collection about the relationship between a young woman and her *abuelita*, or grandmother.

I was fourteen years old when Abuelita requested my help. And it seemed only fair. Abuelita had pulled me through the rages of scarlet fever by placing, removing and replacing potato slices on the temples of my forehead; she had seen me through several whippings, an arm broken by a dare jump off Tío Enrique's tool-shed, puberty, and my first lie. Really, I told Amá, it was only fair.

Not that I was her favorite granddaughter or anything special. I wasn't even pretty or nice like my older sisters and I just couldn't do the girl things they could do. My hands were too big to handle the fineries of crocheting or embroidery and I always pricked my fingers or knotted my colored threads time and time again while my sisters laughed and called me bull hands with their cute waterlike voices. So I began keeping a piece of jagged brick in my sock to bash my sisters or anyone who called me bull hands. Once, while we all sat in the bedroom, I hit Teresa on the forehead, right above her eyebrow and she ran to Amá with her mouth open, her hand over her eye while blood seeped between her fingers. I was used to the whippings by then.

I wasn't respectful either. I even went so far as to doubt the power of Abuelita's slices, the slices she said absorbed my fever. "You're still alive, aren't you?" Abuelita snapped back, her pasty gray eye beaming at me and burning holes in my suspicions. Regretful that I had let secret questions drop out of my mouth, I couldn't look into her eyes. My hands began to fan out, grow like a liar's nose until they hung by my side like low weights. Abuelita made a balm out of dried moth wings and Vicks and rubbed my hands, shaped them back to size and it was the strangest feeling. Like bones melting. Like sun shining through the darkness of your eyelids. I didn't mind helping Abuelita after that, so Amá would always send me over to her.

In the early afternoon Amá would push her hair back, hand me my sweater and shoes, and tell me to go to Mama Luna's. This was to avoid another fight and another whipping, I knew. I would deliver one last direct shot on Marisela's arm and jump out of our house, the slam of the screen door burying her cries of anger, and I'd gladly go help Abuelita plant her wild lilies or jasmine or heliotrope or cilantro or hierba-buena[1] in red Hills Brothers coffee cans.

[1] Also yerba buena, or "good herb," a plant in the mint family that is steeped to make a tea-like beverage. — EDS.

Abuelita would wait for me at the top step of her porch holding a hammer and nail and empty coffee cans. And although we hardly spoke, hardly looked at each other as we worked over root transplants, I always felt her gray eye on me. It made me feel, in a strange sort of way, safe and guarded and not alone. Like God was supposed to make you feel.

On Abuelita's porch, I would puncture holes 5
in the bottom of the coffee cans with a nail and a precise hit of a hammer. This completed, my job was to fill them with red clay mud from beneath her rose bushes, packing it softly, then making a perfect hole, four fingers round, to nest a sprouting avocado pit, or the spidery sweet potatoes that Abuelita rooted in mayonnaise jars with toothpicks and daily water, or prickly chayotes[2] that produced vines that twisted and wound all over her porch pillars, crawling to the roof, up and over the roof, and down the other side, making her small brick house look like it was cradled within the vines that grew pear-shaped squashes ready for the pick, ready to be steamed with onions and cheese and butter. The roots would burst out of the rusted coffee cans and search for a place to connect. I would then feed the seedlings with water.

But this was a different kind of help, Amá said, because Abuelita was dying. Looking into her gray eye, then into her brown one, the doctor said it was just a matter of days. And so it seemed only fair that these hands she had melted and formed found use in rubbing her caving body with alcohol and marihuana, rubbing her arms and legs, turning her face to the window so that she could watch the Bird of Paradise blooming or smell the scent of clove in the air. I toweled her face frequently and held her hand for hours. Her gray wiry hair hung over the mattress. Since I could remember, she'd kept her long hair in braids. Her mouth was vacant and when she slept, her eyelids never closed all the way. Up close, you could see her gray eye beaming out the window, staring hard as if to remember everything. I never kissed her. I left the window open when I went to the market.

Across the street from Jay's Market there was a chapel. I never knew its denomination, but I went in just the same to search for candles. I sat down on one of the pews because there were none. After I cleaned my fingernails, I looked up at the high ceiling. I had forgotten the vastness of these places, the coolness of the marble pillars and the frozen statues with blank eyes. I was alone. I knew why I had never returned.

That was one of Apá's biggest complaints. He would pound his hands on the table, rocking the sugar dish or spilling a cup of coffee and scream that if I didn't go to mass every Sunday to save my goddamn sinning soul, then I had no reason to go out of the house, period. Punto final.[3] He would grab my arm and dig his nails into me to make sure I understood the importance of catechism. Did he make himself clear? Then he strategically directed his anger at Amá for her lousy ways of bringing up daughters, being disrespectful and unbelieving, and my older sisters would pull me aside and tell me if I didn't get to mass right this minute, they were all going to kick the holy shit out of me. Why am I so selfish? Can't you see what it's doing to Amá, you idiot? So I would wash my feet and stuff them in my black Easter shoes that shone with Vaseline, grab a missal and veil, and wave good-bye to Amá.

I would walk slowly down Lorena to First to Evergreen, counting the cracks on the cement. On Evergreen I would turn left and walk to Abuelita's. I liked her porch because it was shielded by the vines of the chayotes and I could get a good look at the people and car traffic on

[2] Pear-shaped vegetable similar to a cucumber. — EDS.

[3] Final point, period. — EDS.

Evergreen without them knowing. I would jump up the porch steps, knock on the screen door as I wiped my feet and call Abuelita? mi Abuelita? As I opened the door and stuck my head in, I would catch the gagging scent of toasting chile on the placa.[4] When I entered the sala,[5] she would greet me from the kitchen, wringing her hands in her apron. I'd sit at the corner of the table to keep from being in her way. The chiles made my eyes water. Am I crying? No, Mama Luna, I'm sure not crying. I don't like going to mass, but my eyes watered anyway, the tears dropping on the tablecloth like candle wax. Abuelita lifted the burnt chiles from the fire and sprinkled water on them until the skins began to separate. Placing them in front of me, she turned to check the menudo.[6] I peeled the skins off and put the flimsy, limp looking green and yellow chiles in the molcajete[7] and began to crush and crush and twist and crush the heart out of the tomato, the clove of garlic, the stupid chiles that made me cry, crushed them until they turned into liquid under my bull hand. With a wooden spoon, I scraped hard to destroy the guilt, and my tears were gone. I put the bowl of chile next to a vase filled with freshly cut roses. Abuelita touched my hand and pointed to the bowl of menudo that steamed in front of me. I spooned some chile into the menudo and rolled a corn tortilla thin with the palms of my hands. As I ate, a fine Sunday breeze entered the kitchen and a rose petal calmly feathered down to the table.

I left the chapel without blessing myself and 10
walked to Jay's. Most of the time Jay didn't have much of anything. The tomatoes were always soft and the cans of Campbell soups had rusted spots on them. There was dust on the tops of cereal boxes. I picked up what I needed: rubbing alcohol, five cans of chicken broth, a big bottle of Pine Sol. At first Jay got mad because I thought I had forgotten the money. But it was there all the time, in my back pocket.

When I returned from the market, I heard Amá crying in Abuelita's kitchen. She looked up at me with puffy eyes. I placed the bags of groceries on the table and began putting the cans of soup away. Amá sobbed quietly. I never kissed her. After a while, I patted her on the back for comfort. Finally: "¿Y mi Amá?"[8] she asked in a whisper, then choked again and cried into her apron.

Abuelita fell off the bed twice yesterday, I said, knowing that I shouldn't have said it and wondering why I wanted to say it because it only made Amá cry harder. I guess I became angry and just so tired of the quarrels and beatings and unanswered prayers and my hands just there hanging helplessly by my side. Amá looked at me again, confused, angry, and her eyes were filled with sorrow. I went outside and sat on the porch swing and watched the people pass. I sat there until she left. I dozed off repeating the words to myself like rosary prayers: when do you stop giving when do you start giving when do you . . . and when my hands fell from my lap, I awoke to catch them. The sun was setting, an orange glow, and I knew Abuelita was hungry.

There comes a time when the sun is defiant. Just about the time when moods change, inevitable seasons of a day, transitions from one color to another, that hour or minute or second when the sun is finally defeated, finally sinks into the realization that it cannot with all its power to heal or burn, exist forever, there comes an illumination where the sun and earth meet, a final burst of burning red orange fury reminding us that although endings are inevitable, they are necessary for rebirths, and when that time came,

[4] Plate. — EDS.
[5] Living room. — EDS.
[6] Traditional Mexican soup made with tripe. — EDS.
[7] Stone bowl used for grinding foods or spices, similar to a mortar and pestle. — EDS.
[8] "And my Mama?" — EDS.

just when I switched on the light in the kitchen to open Abuelita's can of soup, it was probably then that she died.

The room smelled of Pine Sol and vomit and Abuelita had defecated the remains of her cancerous stomach. She had turned to the window and tried to speak, but her mouth remained open and speechless. I heard you, Abuelita, I said, stroking her cheek, I heard you. I opened the windows of the house and let the soup simmer and overboil on the stove. I turned the stove off and poured the soup down the sink. From the cabinet I got a tin basin, filled it with lukewarm water and carried it carefully to the room. I went to the linen closet and took out some modest bleached white towels. With the sacredness of a priest preparing his vestments, I unfolded the towels one by one on my shoulders. I removed the sheets and blankets from her bed and peeled off her thick flannel nightgown. I toweled her puzzled face, stretching out the wrinkles, removing the coils of her neck, toweled her shoulders and breasts. Then I changed the water. I returned to towel the creases of her stretch-marked stomach, her sporadic vaginal hairs, and her sagging thighs. I removed the lint from between her toes and noticed a mapped birthmark on the fold of her buttock. The scars on her back which were as thin as the life lines on the palms of her hands made me realize how little I really knew of Abuelita. I covered her with a thin blanket and went into the bathroom. I washed my hands, and turned on the tub faucets and watched the water pour into the tub with vitality and steam. When it was full, I turned off the water and undressed. Then, I went to get Abuelita.

She was not as heavy as I thought and when I carried her in my arms, her body fell into a V, and yet my legs were tired, shaky, and I felt as if the distance between the bedroom and bathroom was miles and years away. Amá, where are you? 15

I stepped into the bathtub one leg first, then the other. I bent my knees slowly to descend into the water slowly so I wouldn't scald her skin. There, there, Abuelita, I said, cradling her, smoothing her as we descended, I heard you. Her hair fell back and spread across the water like eagle's wings. The water in the tub overflowed and poured onto the tile of the floor. Then the moths came. Small, gray ones that came from her soul and out through her mouth fluttering to light, circling the single dull light bulb of the bathroom. Dying is lonely and I wanted to go to where the moths were, stay with her and plant chayotes whose vines would crawl up her fingers and into the clouds; I wanted to rest my head on her chest with her stroking my hair, telling me about the moths that lay within the soul and slowly eat the spirit up; I wanted to return to the waters of the womb with her so that we would never be alone again. I wanted. I wanted my Amá. I removed a few strands of hair from Abuelita's face and held her small light head within the hollow of my neck. The bathroom was filled with moths, and for the first time in a long time I cried, rocking us, crying for her, for me, for Amá, the sobs emerging from the depths of anguish, the misery of feeling half born, sobbing until finally the sobs rippled into circles and circles of sadness and relief. There, there, I said to Abuelita, rocking us gently, there, there.

[1985]

EXPLORING THE TEXT

1. The story opens with the narrator's grandmother applying potato slices to the narrator's fevered brow. Compare this opening with the conclusion of the story. What is the significance of the contrast between the gentleness at the beginning and end of the story, and the rough treatment the narrator typically gives to family members ("I hit Teresa on the forehead," para. 2) and receives from them ("He would grab my arm and dig his nails into me," para. 8)?
2. How does the work Abuelita asks the narrator to do — planting, cooking — help the teenager deal with her pent-up anger?
3. As the narrator cares for her dying grandmother, she begins to ask herself, "when do you stop giving when do you start giving" (para. 12), continuing the repetition of the word "when" throughout the following paragraph. What is the significance of this repetition for the fourteen-year-old narrator? What might she be questioning in her own life?
4. Trace the references to hands in this story. How do you interpret the poultice balm of moth wings that Abuelita uses to shape the narrator's hands back into shape? What is the significance of this act?
5. What is the role of religion and spirituality in this story? Why does the narrator think to herself when she is in the chapel, "I was alone. I knew why I had never returned" (para. 7)? What conflicts does religion cause in her family?
6. Note the references throughout to Amá, the narrator's mother. When Amá is crying in Abuelita's kitchen, why does the narrator choose not to kiss her? Why at the end does the narrator say, "I wanted. I wanted my Amá" (para. 16)? What is the nature of the relationship among these three generations of women? What does the narrator want it to be?
7. What do the moths represent in the story?
8. Describe the ways in which the narrator is an outcast in her own family. What does her grandmother seem to understand that the girl's immediate family members do not?
9. Does the narrator's fearlessness about death strike you as unusual? Why do you think she is comfortable enough to bathe her dead Abuelita? Consider the sensuous descriptions throughout the story.

The Progress of Love

ALICE MUNRO

Alice Munro (b. 1931) is a Nobel Prize–winning Canadian writer, known primarily for her short stories. Munro was born in Ontario and began writing as a teenager, publishing her first story in 1950 while studying English and journalism at the University of Western Ontario. Munro's first story collection, *Dance of the Happy Shades* (1968), won the Governor General's Award, then Canada's highest literary prize. Her publications include fourteen original short story collections, a novel, and numerous major awards. Munro won the 1998 National Book Critics Circle Award for her story collection *The Love of a Good Woman*. For her contributions to the short story genre and to literature as a whole, Munro won the 2009 Man Booker International Prize and the 2013 Nobel Prize in Literature. Munro's stories are often set in Ontario, feature a strong regional focus, and present characters against a backdrop of deeply rooted customs and traditions. They also often employ a nonchronological structure reflecting the psychological complexity of memory and experience. In "The Progress of Love," Munro follows a narrator's nonlinear memories and reflections to examine a lifetime of changing family dynamics.

I got a call at work, and it was my father. This was not long after I was divorced and started in the real-estate office. Both of my boys were in school. It was a hot enough day in September.

My father was so polite, even in the family. He took time to ask me how I was. Country manners. Even if somebody phones up to tell you your house is burning down, they ask first how you are.

"I'm fine," I said. "How are you?"

"Not so good, I guess," said my father, in his old way — apologetic but self-respecting. "I think your mother's gone."

I knew that "gone" meant "dead." I knew that. But for a second or so I saw my mother in her black straw hat setting off down the lane. The word "gone" seemed full of nothing but a deep relief and even an excitement — the excitement you feel when a door closes and your house sinks back to normal and you let yourself loose into all the free space around you. That was in my father's voice, too — behind the apology, a queer sound like a gulped breath. But my mother hadn't been a burden — she hadn't been sick a day — and far from feeling relieved at her death, my father took it hard. He never got used to living alone, he said. He went into the Netterfield County Home quite willingly.

He told me how he found my mother on the couch in the kitchen when he came in at noon. She had picked a few tomatoes, and was setting them on the windowsill to ripen; then she must have felt weak, and lain down. Now, telling this, his voice went wobbly — meandering, as you would expect — in his amazement. I saw in my mind the couch, the old quilt that protected it, right under the phone.

"So I thought I better call you," my father said, and he waited for me to say what he should do now.

My mother prayed on her knees at midday, at night, and first thing in the morning. Every day opened up to her to have God's will done in it. Every night she totted up what she'd done and said and thought, to see how it squared with Him. That kind of life is dreary, people think, but they're missing the point. For one thing, such a life can never be boring. And nothing can happen to you that you can't make use of. Even if you're racked by troubles, and sick and poor and ugly, you've got your soul to carry through life like a treasure on a platter. Going upstairs to pray after the noon meal, my mother would be full of energy and expectation, seriously smiling.

She was saved at a camp meeting when she was fourteen. That was the same summer that her own mother — my grandmother — died. For a few years, my mother went to meetings with a lot of other people who'd been saved, some who'd been saved over and over again, enthusiastic old sinners. She could tell stories about what went on at those meetings, the singing and hollering and wildness. She told about one old man getting up and shouting, "Come down, O Lord, come down among us now! Come down through the roof and I'll pay for the shingles!"

She was back to being just an Anglican, a serious one, by the time she got married. She was twenty-five then, and my father was thirty-eight. A tall good-looking couple, good dancers, good card-players, sociable. But serious people — that's how I would try to describe them. Serious the way hardly anybody is anymore. My father was not religious in the way my mother was. He was an Anglican, an Orangeman, a Conservative, because that's what he had been brought up to be. He was the son who got left on the farm with his parents and took care of them till they died. He met my mother, he waited for her, they married; he thought himself lucky then to have a family to work for. (I have two brothers, and I had a baby sister who died.) I have a feeling that my father never slept with any woman before my mother, and never with her until he married her. And he had to wait, because my mother wouldn't get married until she had paid back to her own father every cent he had spent

on her since her mother died. She had kept track of everything — board, books, clothes — so that she could pay it back. When she married, she had no nest egg, as teachers usually did, no hope chest, sheets, or dishes. My father used to say, with a somber, joking face, that he had hoped to get a woman with money in the bank. "But you take the money in the bank, you have to take the face that goes with it," he said, "and sometimes that's no bargain."

The house we lived in had big, high rooms, with dark-green blinds on the windows. When the blinds were pulled down against the sun, I used to like to move my head and catch the light flashing through the holes and cracks. Another thing I liked looking at was chimney stains, old or fresh, which I could turn into animals, people's faces, even distant cities. I told my own two boys about that, and their father, Dan Casey, said, "See, your mom's folks were so poor, they couldn't afford TV, so they got these stains on the ceiling — your mom had to watch the stains on the ceiling!" He always liked to kid me about thinking poor was anything great.

When my father was very old, I figured out that he didn't mind people doing new sorts of things — for instance, my getting divorced — as much as he minded them having new sorts of reasons for doing them.

Thank God he never had to know about the commune.

"The Lord never intended," he used to say. Sitting around with the other old men in the Home, in the long, dim porch behind the spirea bushes, he talked about how the Lord never intended for people to tear around the country on motorbikes and snowmobiles. And how the Lord never intended for nurses' uniforms to be pants. The nurses didn't mind at all. They called him "Handsome," and told me he was a real old sweetheart, a real old religious gentleman. They marvelled at his thick black hair, which he kept until he died. They washed and combed it beautifully, wet-waved it with their fingers.

Sometimes, with all their care, he was a little unhappy. He wanted to go home. He worried about the cows, the fences, about who was getting up to light the fire. A few flashes of meanness — very few. Once, he gave me a sneaky, unfriendly look when I went in; he said, "I'm surprised you haven't worn all the skin off your knees by now."

I laughed. I said, "What doing? Scrubbing floors?"

"Praying!" he said, in a voice like spitting.

He didn't know who he was talking to.

I don't remember my mother's hair being anything but white. My mother went white in her twenties, and never saved any of her young hair, which had been brown. I used to try to get her to tell what color brown.

"Dark."

"Like Brent, or like Dolly?" Those were two workhorses we had, a team.

"I don't know. It wasn't horsehair."

"Was it like chocolate?"

"Something like."

"Weren't you sad when it went white?"

"No. I was glad."

"Why?"

"I was glad that I wouldn't have hair anymore that was the same color as my father's."

Hatred is always a sin, my mother told me. Remember that. One drop of hatred in your soul will spread and discolor everything like a drop of black ink in white milk. I was struck by that and meant to try it, but knew I shouldn't waste the milk.

* * *

All these things I remember. All the things I know, or have been told, about people I never even saw. I was named Euphemia, after my mother's mother. A terrible name, such as nobody has nowadays. At home they called me

Phemie, but when I started to work, I called myself Fame. My husband, Dan Casey, called me Fame. Then in the bar of the Shamrock Hotel, years later, after my divorce, when I was going out, a man said to me, "Fame, I've been meaning to ask you, just what is it you are famous for?"

"I don't know," I told him. "I don't know, unless it's for wasting my time talking to jerks like you."

After that I thought of changing it altogether, to something like Joan, but unless I moved away from here, how could I do that?

In the summer of 1947, when I was twelve, I helped my mother paper the downstairs bedroom, the spare room. My mother's sister, Beryl, was coming to visit us. These two sisters hadn't seen each other for years. Very soon after their mother died, their father married again. He went to live in Minneapolis, then in Seattle, with his new wife and his younger daughter, Beryl. My mother wouldn't go with them. She stayed on in the town of Ramsay, where they had been living. She was boarded with a childless couple who had been neighbors. She and Beryl had met only once or twice since they were grown up. Beryl lived in California.

The paper had a design of cornflowers on a white ground. My mother had got it at a reduced price, because it was the end of a lot. This meant we had trouble matching the pattern, and behind the door we had to do some tricky fitting with scraps and strips. This was before the days of pre-pasted wallpaper. We had a trestle table set up in the front room, and we mixed the paste and swept it onto the back of the paper with wide brushes, watching for lumps. We worked with the windows up, screens fitted under them, the front door open, the screens door closed. The country we could see through the mesh of screens and the wavery old window glass was all hot and flowering — milkweed and wild carrot in the pastures, mustard rampaging in the clover, some fields creamy with the buckwheat people grew then. My mother sang. She sang a song she said her own mother used to sing when she and Beryl were little girls.

> *"I once had a sweetheart, but now I have none.*
> *He's gone and he's left me to weep and to moan.*
> *He's gone and he's left me, but contented I'll be,*
> *For I'll get another one, better than he!"*

35 I was excited because Beryl was coming, a visitor, all the way from California. Also, because I had gone to town in late June to write the Entrance Examinations, and was hoping to hear soon that I had passed with honors. Everybody who had finished Grade 8 in the country schools had to go into town to write those examinations. I loved that — the rustling sheets of foolscap, the important silence, the big stone high-school building, all the old initials carved in the desks, darkened with varnish. The first burst of summer outside, the green and yellow light, the townlike chestnut trees, and honeysuckle. And all it was was this same town, where I have lived now more than half my life. I wondered at it. And at myself, drawing maps with ease and solving problems, knowing quantities of answers. I thought I was so clever. But I wasn't clever enough to understand the simplest thing. I didn't even understand that examinations made no difference in my case. I wouldn't be going to high school. How could I? That was before there were school buses; you had to board in town. My parents didn't have the money. They operated on very little cash, as many farmers did then. The payments from the cheese factory were about all that came in regularly. And they didn't think of my life going in that direction, the high-school direction. They thought that I would stay at home and help my mother, maybe hire out to help women in the neighborhood who were sick or having a baby. Until such time as I got married. That was what they were waiting to tell me when I got the results of the examinations.

You would think my mother might have a different idea, since she had been a schoolteacher herself. But she said God didn't care. God isn't interested in what kind of job or what kind of education anybody has, she told me. He doesn't care two hoots about that, and it's what He cares about that matters.

This was the first time I understood how God could become a real opponent, not just some kind of nuisance or large decoration.

My mother's name as a child was Marietta. That continued to be her name, of course, but until Beryl came I never heard her called by it. My father always said Mother. I had a childish notion — I knew it was childish — that Mother suited my mother better than it did other mothers. Mother, not Mama. When I was away from her, I could not think what my mother's face was like, and this frightened me. Sitting in school, just over a hill from home, I would try to picture my mother's face. Sometimes I thought that if I couldn't do it, that might mean my mother was dead. But I had a sense of her all the time, and would be reminded of her by the most unlikely things — an upright piano, or a tall white loaf of bread. That's ridiculous, but true.

Marietta, in my mind, was separate, not swallowed up in my mother's grownup body. Marietta was still running around loose up in her town of Ramsay, on the Ottawa River. In that town, the streets were full of horses and puddles, and darkened by men who came in from the bush on weekends. Loggers. There were eleven hotels on the main street, where the loggers stayed, and drank.

The house Marietta lived in was halfway up a steep street climbing from the river. It was a double house, with two bay windows in front, and a wooden trellis that separated the two front porches. In the other half of the house lived the Sutcliffes, the people Marietta was to board with after her mother died and her father left town. Mr. Sutcliffe was an Englishman, a telegraph operator. His wife was German. She always made coffee instead of tea. She made strudel. The dough for the strudel hung down over the edges of the table like a fine cloth. It sometimes looked to Marietta like a skin.

Mrs. Sutcliffe was the one who talked Marietta's mother out of hanging herself.

Marietta was home from school that day, because it was Saturday. She woke up late and heard the silence in the house. She was always scared of that — a silent house — and as soon as she opened the door after school she would call, "Mama! Mama!" Often her mother wouldn't answer. But she would be there. Marietta would hear with relief the rattle of the stove grate or the steady slap of the iron.

That morning, she didn't hear anything. She came downstairs, and got herself a slice of bread and butter and molasses, folded over. She opened the cellar door and called. She went into the front room and peered out the window, through the bridal fern. She saw her little sister, Beryl, and some other neighborhood children rolling down the bit of grassy terrace to the sidewalk, picking themselves up and scrambling to the top and rolling down again.

"Mama?" called Marietta. She walked through the house to the back yard. It was late spring, the day was cloudy and mild. In the sprouting vegetable gardens, the earth was damp, and the leaves on the trees seemed suddenly full-sized, letting down drops of water left over from the rain of the night before.

"Mama?" calls Marietta under the trees, under the clothesline.

At the end of the yard is a small barn, where they keep firewood, and some tools and old furniture. A chair, a straight-backed wooden chair, can be seen through the open doorway. On the chair, Marietta sees her mother's feet, her mother's black laced shoes. Then the long, printed cotton summer work dress, the apron, the rolled-up sleeves. Her mother's shiny-looking white arms, and neck, and face.

Her mother stood on the chair and didn't answer. She didn't look at Marietta, but smiled and tapped her foot, as if to say, "Here I am, then. What are you going to do about it?" Something looked wrong about her, beyond the fact that she was standing on a chair and smiling in this queer, tight way. Standing on an old chair with back rungs missing, which she had pulled out to the middle of the barn floor, where it teetered on the bumpy earth. There was a shadow on her neck.

The shadow was a rope, a noose on the end of a rope that hung down from a beam overhead.

"Mama?" says Marietta, in a fainter voice "Mama. Come down, please." Her voice is faint because she fears that any yell or cry might jolt her mother into movement, cause her to step off the chair and throw her weight on the rope. But even if Marietta wanted to yell she couldn't. Nothing but this pitiful thread of a voice is left to her — just as in a dream when a beast or a machine is bearing down on you.

"Go and get your father."

That was what her mother told her to do, and Marietta obeyed. With terror in her legs, she ran. In her nightgown, in the middle of a Saturday morning, she ran. She ran past Beryl and the other children, still tumbling down the slope. She ran along the sidewalk, which was at that time a boardwalk, then on the unpaved street, full of last night's puddles. The street crossed the railway tracks. At the foot of the hill, it intersected the main street of the town. Between the main street and the river were some warehouses and the buildings of small manufacturers. That was where Marietta's father had his carriage works. Wagons, buggies, sleds were made there. In fact, Marietta's father had invented a new sort of sled to carry logs in the bush. It had been patented. He was just getting started in Ramsay. (Later on, in the States, he made money. A man fond of hotel bars, barbershops, harness races, women, but not afraid of work — give him credit.)

Marietta did not find him at work that day. The office was empty. She ran out into the yard where the men were working. She stumbled in the fresh sawdust. The men laughed and shook their heads at her. No. Not here. Not a-here right now. No. Why don't you try upstreet? Wait. Wait a minute. Hadn't you better get some clothes on first?

They didn't mean any harm. They didn't have the sense to see that something must be wrong. But Marietta never could stand men laughing. There were always places she hated to go past, let alone into, and that was the reason. Men laughing. Because of that, she hated barbershops, hated their smell. (When she started going to dances later on with my father, she asked him not to put any dressing on his hair, because the smell reminded her.) A bunch of men standing out on the street, outside a hotel, seemed to Marietta like a clot of poison. You tried not to hear what they were saying, but you could be sure it was vile. If they didn't say anything, they laughed and vileness spread out from them — poison — just the same. It was only after Marietta was saved that she could walk right past them. Armed by God, she walked through their midst and nothing stuck to her, nothing scorched her; she was safe as Daniel.

Now she turned and ran, straight back the way she had come. Up the hill, running to get home. She thought she had made a mistake leaving her mother. Why did her mother tell her to go? Why did she want her father? Quite possibly so that she could greet him with the sight of her own warm body swinging on the end of a rope. Marietta should have stayed — she should have stayed and talked her mother out of it. She should have run to Mrs. Sutcliffe, or any neighbor, not wasted time this way. She hadn't thought who could help, who could even believe what she was talking about. She had the idea that all families except her own lived in peace, that threats and miseries didn't exist in other people's houses, and couldn't be explained there.

A train was coming into town. Marietta had to wait. Passengers looked out at her from its windows. She broke out wailing in the faces of those strangers. When the train passed, she continued up the hill — a spectacle, with her hair uncombed, her feet bare and muddy, in her nightgown, with a wild, wet face. By the time she ran into her own yard, in sight of the barn, she was howling. "Mama!" she was howling. "Mama!"

Nobody was there. The chair was standing just where it had been before. The rope was dangling over the back of it. Marietta was sure that her mother had gone ahead and done it. Her mother was already dead — she had been cut down and taken away.

But warm, fat hands settled down on her shoulders, and Mrs. Sutcliffe said, "Marietta. Stop the noise. Marietta. Child. Stop the crying. Come inside. She is well, Marietta. Come inside and you will see."

Mrs. Sutcliffe's foreign voice said, "Mari-et-cha," giving the name a rich, important sound. She was as kind as could be. When Marietta lived with the Sutcliffes later, she was treated as the daughter of the household, and it was a household just as peaceful and comfortable as she had imagined other households to be. But she never felt like a daughter there.

In Mrs. Sutcliffe's kitchen, Beryl sat on the floor eating a raisin cookie and playing with the black-and-white cat, whose name was Dickie. Marietta's mother sat at the table, with a cup of coffee in front of her.

"She was silly," Mrs. Sutcliffe said. Did she mean Marietta's mother or Marietta herself? She didn't have many English words to describe things.

Marietta's mother laughed, and Marietta blacked out. She fainted, after running all that way uphill, howling, in the warm, damp morning. Next thing she knew, she was taking black, sweet coffee from a spoon held by Mrs. Sutcliffe. Beryl picked Dickie up by the front legs and offered him as a cheering present. Marietta's mother was still sitting at the table.

Her heart was broken. That was what I always heard my mother say. That was the end of it. Those words lifted up the story and sealed it shut. I never asked, Who broke it? I never asked, What was the men's poison talk? What was the meaning of the word "vile"?

Marietta's mother laughed after not hanging herself. She sat at Mrs. Sutcliffe's kitchen table long ago and laughed. Her heart was broken.

I always had a feeling, with my mother's talk and stories, of something swelling out behind. Like a cloud you couldn't see through, or get to the end of. There was a cloud, a poison, that had touched my mother's life. And when I grieved my mother, I became part of it. Then I would beat my head against my mother's stomach and breasts, against her tall, firm front, demanding to be forgiven. My mother would tell me to ask God. But it wasn't God, it was my mother I had to get straight with. It seemed as if she knew something about me that was worse, far worse, than ordinary lies and tricks and meanness; it was a really sickening shame. I beat against my mother's front to make her forget that.

My brothers weren't bothered by any of this. I don't think so. They seemed to me like cheerful savages, running around free, not having to learn much. And when I just had the two boys myself, no daughters, I felt as if something could stop now — the stories, and griefs, the old puzzles you can't resist or solve.

Aunt Beryl said not to call her Aunt. "I'm not used to being anybody's aunt, honey. I'm not even anybody's momma. I'm just me. Call me Beryl."

Beryl had started out as a stenographer, and now she had her own typing and bookkeeping business, which employed many girls. She had arrived with a man friend, whose name was Mr. Florence. Her letter had said that she would

be getting a ride with a friend, but she hadn't said whether the friend would be staying or going on. She hadn't even said if it was a man or a woman.

Mr. Florence was staying. He was a tall, thin man with a long, tanned face, very light-colored eyes, and a way of twitching the corner of his mouth that might have been a smile.

He was the one who got to sleep in the room that my mother and I had papered, because he was the stranger, and a man. Beryl had to sleep with me. At first we thought that Mr. Florence was quite rude, because he wasn't used to our way of talking and we weren't used to his. The first morning, my father said to Mr. Florence, "Well, I hope you got some kind of a sleep on that old bed in there?" (The spare-room bed was heavenly, with a feather tick.) This was Mr. Florence's cue to say that he had never slept better.

Mr. Florence twitched. He said, "I slept on worse."

His favorite place to be was in his car. His car was a royal-blue Chrysler, from the first batch turned out after the war. Inside it, the upholstery and floor covering and roof and door padding were all pearl gray. Mr. Florence kept the names of those colors in mind and corrected you if you said just "blue" or "gray."

"Mouse skin is what it looks like to me," said Beryl rambunctiously. "I tell him it's just mouse skin!"

The car was parked at the side of the house, under the locust trees. Mr. Florence sat inside with the windows rolled up, smoking, in the rich new-car smell.

"I'm afraid we're not doing much to entertain your friend," my mother said.

"I wouldn't worry about him," said Beryl. She always spoke about Mr. Florence as if there was a joke about him that only she appreciated. I wondered long afterward if he had a bottle in the glove compartment and took a nip from time to time to keep his spirits up. He kept his hat on.

Beryl herself was being entertained enough for two. Instead of staying in the house and talking to my mother, as a lady visitor usually did, she demanded to be shown everything there was to see on a farm. She said that I was to take her around and explain things, and see that she didn't fall into any manure piles.

I didn't know what to show. I took Beryl to the icehouse, where chunks of ice the size of dresser drawers, or bigger, lay buried in sawdust. Every few days, my father would chop off a piece of ice and carry it to the kitchen, where it melted in a tin-lined box and cooled the milk and butter.

Beryl said she had never had any idea ice came in pieces that big. She seemed intent on finding things strange, or horrible, or funny.

"Where in the world do you get ice that big?"

I couldn't tell if that was a joke.

"Off of the lake," I said.

"Off of the lake! Do you have lakes up here that have ice on them all summer?"

I told her how my father cut the ice on the lake every winter and hauled it home, and buried it in sawdust, and that kept it from melting.

Beryl said, "That's amazing!"

"Well, it melts a little," I said. I was deeply disappointed in Beryl.

"That's really amazing."

Beryl went along when I went to get the cows. A scarecrow in white slacks (this was what my father called her afterward), with a white sun hat tied under her chin by a flaunting red ribbon. Her fingernails and toenails — she wore sandals — were painted to match the ribbon. She wore the small, dark sunglasses people wore at that time. (Not the people I knew — they didn't own sunglasses.) She had a big red mouth, a loud laugh, hair of an unnatural color and a high gloss, like cherry wood. She was so noisy and shiny, so glamorously got up, that it was hard to tell whether she was good-looking, or happy, or anything.

We didn't have any conversation along the cowpath, because Beryl kept her distance from

the cows and was busy watching where she stepped. Once I had them all tied in their stalls, she came closer. She lit a cigarette. Nobody smoked in the barn. My father and other farmers chewed tobacco there instead. I didn't see how I could ask Beryl to chew tobacco.

"Can you get the milk out of them or does your father have to?" Beryl said. "Is it hard to do?"

I pulled some milk down through the cow's teat. One of the barn cats came over and waited. I shot a thin stream into its mouth. The cat and I were both showing off.

"Doesn't that hurt?" said Beryl. "Think if it was you."

I had never thought of a cow's teat as corresponding to any part of myself, and was shaken by this indecency. In fact, I could never grasp a warm, warty teat in such a firm and casual way again.

Beryl slept in a peach-colored rayon nightgown trimmed with écru lace. She had a robe to match. She was just as careful about the word "écru" as Mr. Florence was about his royal blue and pearl gray.

I managed to get undressed and put on my nightgown without any part of me being exposed at any time. An awkward business. I left my underpants on, and hoped that Beryl had done the same. The idea of sharing my bed with a grownup was a torment to me. But I did get to see the contents of what Beryl called her beauty kit. Hand-painted glass jars contained puffs of cotton wool, talcum powder, milky lotion, ice-blue astringent. Little pots of red and mauve rouge — rather greasy-looking. Blue and black pencils. Emery boards, a pumice stone, nail polish with an overpowering smell of bananas, face powder in a celluloid box shaped like a shell, with the name of a dessert — Apricot Delight.

I had heated some water on the coal-oil stove we used in summertime. Beryl scrubbed her face clean, and there was such a change that I almost expected to see makeup lying in strips in the washbowl, like the old wallpaper we had soaked and peeled. Beryl's skin was pale now, covered with fine cracks, rather like the shiny mud at the bottom of puddles drying up in early summer.

"Look what happened to my skin," she said. "Dieting. I weighed a hundred and sixty-nine pounds once, and I took it off too fast and my face fell in on me. Now I've got this cream, though. It's made from a secret formula and you can't even buy it commercially. Smell it. See, it doesn't smell all perfumy. It smells serious."

She was patting the cream on her face with puffs of cotton wool, patting away until there was nothing to be seen on the surface.

"It smells like lard," I said.

"Christ Almighty, I hope I haven't been paying that kind of money to rub lard on my face. Don't tell your mother I swear."

She poured clean water into the drinking glass and wet her comb, then combed her hair wet and twisted each strand round her finger, clamping the twisted strand to her head with two crossed pins. I would be doing the same myself, a couple of years later.

"Always do your hair wet, else it's no good doing it up at all," Beryl said. "And always roll it under even if you want it to flip up. See?"

When I was doing my hair up — as I did for years — I sometimes thought of this, and thought that of all the pieces of advice people had given me, this was the one I had followed most carefully.

We put the lamp out and got into bed, and Beryl said, "I never knew it could get so dark. I've never known a dark that was as dark as this." She was whispering. I was slow to understand that she was comparing country nights to city nights, and I wondered if the darkness in Netterfield County could really be greater than that in California.

"Honey?" whispered Beryl. "Are there any animals outside?"

"Cows," I said.

"Yes, but wild animals? Are there bears?"

"Yes," I said. My father had once found bear tracks and droppings in the bush, and the apples had all been torn off a wild apple tree. That was years ago, when he was a young man.

Beryl moaned and giggled. "Think if Mr. Florence had to go out in the night and he ran into a bear!"

Next day was Sunday. Beryl and Mr. Florence drove my brothers and me to Sunday school in the Chrysler. That was at ten o'clock in the morning. They came back at eleven to bring my parents to church.

"Hop in," Beryl said to me. "You, too," she said to the boys. "We're going for a drive."

Beryl was dressed up in a satiny ivory dress with red dots, and a red-lined frill over the hips, and red high-heeled shoes. Mr. Florence wore a pale-blue summer suit.

"Aren't you going to church?" I said. That was what people dressed up for, in my experience.

Beryl laughed. "Honey, this isn't Mr. Florence's kind of religion."

I was used to going straight from Sunday school into church, and sitting for another hour and a half. In summer, the open windows let in the cedary smell of the graveyard and the occasional, almost sacrilegious sound of a car swooshing by on the road. Today we spent this time driving through country I had never seen before. I had never seen it, though it was less than twenty miles from home. Our truck went to the cheese factory, to church, and to town on Saturday nights. The nearest thing to a drive was when it went to the dump. I had seen the near end of Bell's Lake, because that was where my father cut the ice in winter. You couldn't get close to it in summer; the shoreline was all choked up with bulrushes. I had thought that the other end of the lake would look pretty much the same, but when we drove there today, I saw cottages, docks and boats, dark water reflecting the trees. All this and I hadn't known about it. This, too, was Bell's Lake. I was glad to have seen it at last, but in some way not altogether glad of the surprise.

Finally, a white frame building appeared, with verandas and potted flowers, and some twinkling poplar trees in front. The Wildwood Inn. Today the same building is covered with stucco and done up with Tudor beams and called the Hideaway. The poplar trees have been cut down for a parking lot.

On the way back to the church to pick up my parents, Mr. Florence turned in to the farm next to ours, which belonged to the McAllisters. The McAllisters were Catholics. Our two families were neighborly but not close.

"Come on, boys, out you get," said Beryl to my brothers. "Not you," she said to me. "You stay put." She herded the little boys up to the porch, where some McAllisters were watching. They were in their raggedy home clothes, because their church, or Mass, or whatever it was, got out early. Mrs. McAllister came out and stood listening, rather dumbfounded, to Beryl's laughing talk.

Beryl came back to the car by herself. "There," she said. "They're going to play with the neighbor children."

Play with McAllisters? Besides being Catholics, all but the baby were girls.

"They've still got their good clothes on," I said.

"So what? Can't they have a good time with their good clothes on? I do!"

My parents were taken by surprise as well. Beryl got out and told my father he was to ride in the front seat, for the legroom. She got into the back, with my mother and me. Mr. Florence turned again onto the Bell's Lake road, and Beryl announced that we were all going to the Wildwood Inn for dinner.

"You're all dressed up, why not take advantage?" she said. "We dropped the boys off with

your neighbors. I thought they might be too young to appreciate it. The neighbors were happy to have them." She said with a further emphasis that it was to be their treat. Hers and Mr. Florence's.

"Well, now," said my father. He probably didn't have five dollars in his pocket. "Well, now. I wonder do they let the farmers in?"

He made various jokes along this line. In the hotel dining room, which was all in white — white tablecloths, white painted chairs — with sweating glass water pitchers and high, whirring fans, he picked up a table napkin the size of a diaper and spoke to me in a loud whisper, "Can you tell me what to do with this thing? Can I put it on my head to keep the draft off?"

Of course he had eaten in hotel dining rooms before. He knew about table napkins and pie forks. And my mother knew — she wasn't even a country woman, to begin with. Nevertheless this was a huge event. Not exactly a pleasure — as Beryl must have meant it to be — but a huge, unsettling event. Eating a meal in public, only a few miles from home, eating in a big room full of people you didn't know, the food served by a stranger, a snippy-looking girl who was probably a college student working at a summer job.

"I'd like the rooster," my father said. "How long has he been in the pot?" It was only good manners, as he knew it, to joke with people who waited on him.

"Beg your pardon?" the girl said.

"Roast chicken," said Beryl. "Is that okay for everybody?"

Mr. Florence was looking gloomy. Perhaps he didn't care for jokes when it was his money that was being spent. Perhaps he had counted on something better than ice water to fill up the glasses.

The waitress put down a dish of celery and olives, and my mother said, "Just a minute while I give thanks." She bowed her head and said quietly but audibly, "Lord, bless this food to our use, and us to Thy service, for Christ's sake. Amen." Refreshed, she sat up straight and passed the dish to me, saying, "Mind the olives. There's stones in them."

Beryl was smiling around at the room.

The waitress came back with a basket of rolls.

"Parker House!" Beryl leaned over and breathed in their smell. "Eat them while they're hot enough to melt the butter!"

Mr. Florence twitched, and peered into the butter dish. "Is that what this is — butter? I thought it was Shirley Temple's curls."

His face was hardly less gloomy than before, but it was a joke, and his making it seemed to convey to us something of the very thing that had just been publicly asked for — a blessing.

"When he says something funny," said Beryl — who often referred to Mr. Florence as "he" even when he was right there — "you notice how he always keeps a straight face? That reminds me of Mama. I mean of our mama, Marietta's and mine. Daddy, when he made a joke you could see it coming a mile away — he couldn't keep it off his face — but Mama was another story. She could look so sour. But she could joke on her deathbed. In fact, she did that very thing. Marietta, remember when she was in bed in the front room the spring before she died?"

"I remember she was in bed in that room," my mother said. "Yes."

"Well, Daddy came in and she was lying there in her clean nightgown, with the covers off, because the German lady from next door had just been helping her take a wash, and she was still there tidying up the bed. So Daddy wanted to be cheerful, and he said, 'Spring must be coming. I saw a crow today.' This must have been in March. And Mama said quick as a shot, 'Well, you better cover me up then, before it looks in that window and gets any ideas!' The German lady — Daddy said she just about dropped the basin. Because it was true, Mama

was skin and bones; she was dying. But she could joke."

Mr. Florence said, "Might as well when there's no use to cry."

"But she could carry a joke too far, Mama could. One time, one time, she wanted to give Daddy a scare. He was supposed to be interested in some girl that kept coming around to the works. Well, he was a big good-looking man. So Mama said, 'Well, I'll just do away with myself, and you can get on with her and see how you like it when I come back and haunt you.' He told her not to be so stupid, and he went off downtown. And Mama went out to the barn and climbed on a chair and put a rope around her neck. Didn't she, Marietta? Marietta went looking for her and she found her like that!"

My mother bent her head and put her hands in her lap, almost as if she was getting ready to say another grace.

"Daddy told me all about it, but I can remember anyway. I remember Marietta tearing off down the hill in her nightie, and I guess the German lady saw her go, and she came out and was looking for Mama, and somehow we all ended up in the barn — me, too, and some kids I was playing with — and there was Mama up on a chair preparing to give Daddy the fright of his life. She'd sent Marietta after him. And the German lady starts wailing, 'Oh, Missus, come down Missus, think of your little *kindren*' — '*kindren*' is the German for 'children' — 'think of your *kindren*,' and so on. Until it was me standing there — I was just a little squirt, but I was the one noticed that rope. My eyes followed that rope up and up and I saw it was just hanging over the beam, just flung there — it wasn't tied at all! Marietta hadn't noticed that, the German lady hadn't noticed it. But I just spoke up and said, 'Mama, how are you going to manage to hang yourself without that rope tied around the beam?' "

Mr. Florence said, "That'd be a tough one."

"I spoiled her game. The German lady made coffee and we went over there and had a few treats, and, Marietta, you couldn't find Daddy after all, could you? You could hear Marietta howling, coming up the hill, a block away."

"Natural for her to be upset," my father said.

"Sure it was. Mama went too far."

"She meant it," my mother said. "She meant it more than you give her credit for."

"She meant to get a rise out of Daddy. That was their whole life together. He always said she was a hard woman to live with, but she had a lot of character. I believe he missed that, with Gladys."

"I wouldn't know," my mother said, in that particularly steady voice with which she always spoke of her father. "What he did say or didn't say."

"People are dead now," said my father. "It isn't up to us to judge."

"I know," said Beryl. "I know Marietta's always had a different view."

My mother looked at Mr. Florence and smiled quite easily and radiantly. "I'm sure you don't know what to make of all these family matters."

The one time that I visited Beryl, when Beryl was an old woman, all knobby and twisted up with arthritis, Beryl said, "Marietta got all Daddy's looks. And she never did a thing with herself. Remember her wearing that old navy-blue crêpe dress when we went to the hotel that time? Of course, I know it was probably all she had, but did it have to be all she had? You know, I was scared of her somehow. I couldn't stay in a room alone with her. But she had outstanding looks." Trying to remember an occasion when I had noticed my mother's looks, I thought of the time in the hotel, my mother's pale-olive skin against the heavy white, coiled hair, her open, handsome face smiling at Mr. Florence — as if he was the one to be forgiven.

I didn't have a problem right away with Beryl's story. For one thing, I was hungry and greedy, and a lot of my attention went to the roast

chicken and gravy and mashed potatoes laid on the plate with an ice-cream scoop and the bright diced vegetables out of a can, which I thought much superior to those fresh from the garden. For dessert, I had a butterscotch sundae, an agonizing choice over chocolate. The others had plain vanilla ice cream.

Why shouldn't Beryl's version of the same event be different from my mother's? Beryl was strange in every way — everything about her was slanted, seen from a new angle. It was my mother's version that held, for a time. It absorbed Beryl's story, closed over it. But Beryl's story didn't vanish; it stayed sealed off for years, but it wasn't gone. It was like the knowledge of that hotel and dining room. I knew about it now, though I didn't think of it as a place to go back to. And indeed, without Beryl's or Mr. Florence's money, I couldn't. But I knew it was there.

The next time I was in the Wildwood Inn, in fact, was after I was married. The Lions Club had a banquet and dance there. The man I had married, Dan Casey, was a Lion. You could get a drink there by that time. Dan Casey wouldn't have gone anywhere you couldn't. Then the place was remodelled into the Hideaway, and now they have strippers every night but Sunday. On Thursday nights, they have a male stripper. I go there with people from the real-estate office to celebrate birthdays or other big events.

The farm was sold for five thousand dollars in 1965. A man from Toronto bought it, for a hobby farm or just an investment. After a couple of years, he rented it to a commune. They stayed there, different people drifting on and off, for a dozen years or so. They raised goats and sold the milk to the health-food store that had opened up in town. They painted a rainbow across the side of the barn that faced the road. They hung tie-dyed sheets over the windows, and let the long grass and flowering weeds reclaim the yard. My parents had finally got electricity in, but these people didn't use it. They preferred oil lamps and the wood stove, and taking their dirty clothes to town. People said they wouldn't know how to handle lamps or wood fires, and they would burn the place down. But they didn't. In fact, they didn't manage badly. They kept the house and barn in some sort of repair and they worked a big garden. They even dusted their potatoes against blight — though I heard that there was some sort of row about this and some of the stricter members left. The place actually looked a lot better than many of the farms round about that were still in the hands of the original families. The McAllister son had started a wrecking business on their place. My own brothers were long gone.

I knew I was not being reasonable, but I had the feeling that I'd rather see the farm suffer outright neglect — I'd sooner see it in the hands of hoodlums and scroungers — than see that rainbow on the barn, and some letters that looked Egyptian painted on the wall of the house. That seemed a mockery. I even disliked the sight of those people when they came to town — the men with their hair in ponytails, and with holes in their overalls that I believed were cut on purpose, and the women with long hair and no makeup and their meek, superior expressions. What do you know about life, I felt like asking them. What makes you think you can come here and mock my father and mother and their life and their poverty? But when I thought of the rainbow and those letters, I knew they weren't trying to mock or imitate my parents' life. They had displaced that life, hardly knowing it existed. They had set up in its place these beliefs and customs of their own, which I hoped would fail them.

That happened, more or less. The commune 160
disintegrated. The goats disappeared. Some of the women moved to town, cut their hair, put on makeup, and got jobs as waitresses or cashiers to support their children. The Toronto man put the place up for sale, and after about a year it was sold for more than ten times what he had paid

for it. A young couple from Ottawa bought it. They have painted the outside a pale gray with oyster trim, and have put in skylights and a handsome front door with carriage lamps on either side. Inside, they've changed it around so much that I've been told I'd never recognize it.

I did get in once, before this happened, during the year that the house was empty and for sale. The company I work for was handling it, and I had a key, though the house was being shown by another agent. I let myself in on a Sunday afternoon. I had a man with me, not a client but a friend — Bob Marks, whom I was seeing a lot at the time.

"This is that hippie place," Bob Marks said when I stopped the car. "I've been by here before."

He was a lawyer, a Catholic, separated from his wife. He thought he wanted to settle down and start up a practice here in town. But there already was one Catholic lawyer. Business was slow. A couple of times a week, Bob Marks would be fairly drunk before supper.

"It's more than that," I said. "It's where I was born. Where I grew up." We walked through the weeds, and I unlocked the door.

He said that he had thought, from the way I talked, that it would be farther out.

"It seemed farther then."

All the rooms were bare, and the floors swept clean. The woodwork was freshly painted — I was surprised to see no smudges on the glass. Some new panes, some old wavy ones. Some of the walls had been stripped of their paper and painted. A wall in the kitchen was painted a deep blue, with an enormous dove on it. On a wall in the front room, giant sunflowers appeared, and a butterfly of almost the same size.

Bob Marks whistled. "Somebody was an artist."

"If that's what you want to call it," I said, and turned back to the kitchen. The same wood stove was there. "My mother once burned up three thousand dollars," I said. "She burned three thousand dollars in that stove."

He whistled again, differently. "What do you mean? She threw in a check?"

"No, no. It was in bills. She did it deliberately. She went into town to the bank and she had them give it all to her, in a shoebox. She brought it home and put it in the stove. She put it in just a few bills at a time, so it wouldn't make too big a blaze. My father stood and watched her."

"What are you talking about?" said Bob Marks. "I thought you were so poor."

"We were. We were very poor."

"So how come she had three thousand dollars? That would be like thirty thousand today. Easily. More than thirty thousand today."

"It was her legacy," I said. "It was what she got from her father. Her father died in Seattle and left her three thousand dollars, and she burned it up because she hated him. She didn't want his money. She hated him."

"That's a lot of hate," Bob Marks said.

"That isn't the point. Her hating him, or whether he was bad enough for her to have a right to hate him. Not likely he was. That isn't the point."

"Money," he said. "Money's always the point."

"No. My father letting her do it is the point. To me it is. My father stood and watched and he never protested. If anybody had tried to stop her, he would have protected her. I consider that love."

"Some people would consider it lunacy."

I remember that that had been Beryl's opinion, exactly.

I went into the front room and stared at the butterfly, with its pink-and-orange wings. Then I went into the front bedroom and found two human figures painted on the wall. A man and a woman holding hands and facing straight ahead. They were naked, and larger than life size.

"It reminds me of that John Lennon and Yoko Ono picture," I said to Bob Marks, who had come in behind me. "That record cover, wasn't

it?" I didn't want him to think that anything he had said in the kitchen had upset me.

Bob Marks said, "Different color hair."

That was true. Both figures had yellow hair painted in a solid mass, the way they do it in the comic strips. Horsetails of yellow hair curling over their shoulders and little pigs' tails of yellow hair decorating their not so private parts. Their skin was a flat beige pink and their eyes a staring blue, the same blue that was on the kitchen wall.

I noticed that they hadn't quite finished peeling the wallpaper away before making this painting. In the corner, there was some paper left that matched the paper on the other walls — a modernistic design of intersecting pink and gray and mauve bubbles. The man from Toronto must have put that on. The paper underneath hadn't been stripped off when this new paper went on. I could see an edge of it, the cornflowers on a white ground.

"I guess this was where they carried on their sexual shenanigans," Bob Marks said, in a tone familiar to me. That thickened, sad, uneasy, but determined tone. The not particularly friendly lust of middle-aged respectable men.

I didn't say anything. I worked away some of the bubble paper to see more of the cornflowers. Suddenly I hit a loose spot, and ripped away a big swatch of it. But the cornflower paper came, too, and a little shower of dried plaster.

"Why is it?" I said. "Just tell me, why is it that no man can mention a place like this without getting around to the subject of sex in about two seconds flat? Just say the words 'hippie' or 'commune' and all you guys can think about is screwing! As if there wasn't anything at all behind it but orgies and fancy combinations and non-stop screwing! I get so sick of that — it's all so stupid it just makes me sick!"

In the car, on the way home from the hotel, we sat as before — the men in the front seat, the women in the back. I was in the middle, Beryl and my mother on either side of me. Their heated bodies pressed against me, through cloth; their smells crowded out the smells of the cedar bush we passed through, and the pockets of bog, where Beryl exclaimed at the water lilies. Beryl smelled of all those things in pots and bottles. My mother smelled of flour and hard soap and the warm crêpe of her good dress and the kerosene she had used to take the spots off.

"A lovely meal," my mother said. "Thank you, Beryl. Thank you, Mr. Florence."

"I don't know who is going to be fit to do the milking," my father said. "Now that we've all ate in such style."

"Speaking of money," said Beryl — though nobody actually had been — "do you mind my asking what you did with yours? I put mine in real estate. Real estate in California — you can't lose. I was thinking you could get an electric stove, so you wouldn't have to bother with a fire in summer or fool with that coal-oil thing, either one."

All the other people in the car laughed, even Mr. Florence.

"That's a good idea, Beryl," said my father. "We could use it to set things on till we get the electricity."

"Oh, Lord," said Beryl. "How stupid can I get?"

"And we don't actually have the money, either," my mother said cheerfully, as if she was continuing the joke.

But Beryl spoke sharply. "You wrote me you got it. You got the same as me."

My father half turned in his seat. "What money are you talking about?" he said. "What's this money?"

"From Daddy's will," Beryl said. "That you got last year. Look, maybe I shouldn't have asked. If you had to pay something off, that's still a good use, isn't it? It doesn't matter. We're all family here. Practically."

"We didn't have to use it to pay anything off," my mother said. "I burned it."

Then she told how she went into town in the truck, one day almost a year ago, and got them to give her the money in a box she had brought along for the purpose. She took it home, and put it in the stove and burned it.

My father turned around and faced the road ahead.

I could feel Beryl twisting beside me while my mother talked. She was twisting, and moaning a little, as if she had a pain she couldn't suppress. At the end of the story, she let out a sound of astonishment and suffering, an angry groan.

"So you burned up money!" she said. "You burned up money in the stove."

My mother was still cheerful. "You sound as if I'd burned up one of my children."

"You burned their chances. You burned up everything the money could have got for them."

"The last thing my children need is money. None of us need his money."

"That's criminal," Beryl said harshly. She pitched her voice into the front seat: "Why did you let her?"

"He wasn't there," my mother said. "Nobody was there."

My father said, "It was her money, Beryl."

"Never mind," Beryl said. "That's criminal."

"Criminal is for when you call in the police," Mr. Florence said. Like other things he had said that day, this created a little island of surprise and a peculiar gratitude.

Gratitude not felt by all.

"Don't you pretend this isn't the craziest thing you ever heard of," Beryl shouted into the front seat. "Don't you pretend you don't think so! Because it is, and you do. You think just the same as me!"

My father did not stand in the kitchen watching my mother feed the money into the flames. It wouldn't appear so. He did not know about it — it seems fairly clear, if I remember everything, that he did not know about it until that Sunday afternoon in Mr. Florence's Chrysler, when my mother told them all together. Why, then, can I see the scene so clearly, just as I described it to Bob Marks (and to others — he was not the first)? I see my father standing by the table in the middle of the room — the table with the drawer in it for knives and forks, and the scrubbed oilcloth on top — and there is the box of money on the table. My mother is carefully dropping the bills into the fire. She holds the stove lid by the blackened lifter in one hand. And my father, standing by, seems not just to be permitting her to do this but to be protecting her. A solemn scene, but not crazy. People doing something that seems to them natural and necessary. At least, one of them is doing what seems natural and necessary, and the other believes that the important thing is for that person to be free, to go ahead. They understand that other people might not think so. They do not care.

How hard it is for me to believe that I made that up. It seems so much the truth it is the truth; it's what I believe about them. I haven't stopped believing it. But I have stopped telling that story. I never told it to anyone again after telling it to Bob Marks. I don't think so. I didn't stop just because it wasn't, strictly speaking, true. I stopped because I saw that I had to give up expecting people to see it the way I did. I had to give up expecting them to approve of any part of what was done. How could I even say that I approved of it myself? If I had been the sort of person who approved of that, who could do it, I wouldn't have done all I have done — run away from home to work in a restaurant in town when I was fifteen, gone to night school to learn typing and bookkeeping, got into the real-estate office, and finally become a licensed agent. I wouldn't be divorced. My father wouldn't have died in the county home. My hair would be white, as it has been naturally for years, instead of a color called Copper Sunrise. And not one of these things would I change, not really, if I could.

Bob Marks was a decent man — good-hearted, sometimes with imagination. After I had lashed out at him like that, he said, "You don't need to be so tough on us." In a moment, he said, "Was this your room when you were a little girl?" He thought that was why the mention of the sexual shenanigans had upset me.

And I thought it would be just as well to let him think that. I said yes, yes, it was my room when I was a little girl. It was just as well to make up right away. Moments of kindness and reconciliation are worth having, even if the parting has to come sooner or later. I wonder if those moments aren't more valued, and deliberately gone after, in the setups some people like myself have now, than they were in those old marriages, where love and grudges could be growing underground, so confused and stubborn, it must have seemed they had forever.

[1986]

EXPLORING THE TEXT

1. Why do you think the story is called "The Progress of Love"? What kind of progress does Euphemia make (or not make)?
2. "The Progress of Love" spans three distinct time periods. Considering both the changes in the setting and the character of the narrator, Euphemia, identify each period. How does Alice Munro characterize each one? How do her language choices signal each transition through time?
3. Novelist and short story writer Lorrie Moore has said, "If short stories are about life and novels are about the world, one can see Munro's capacious stories as being a little about both: fate and time and love are the things she is most interested in, as well as their unexpected outcomes." In what ways is "The Progress of Love" about life? In what ways is it about fate?
4. Take a careful look at paragraph 158. How do Munro's diction and syntax choices help her achieve her purpose here? How do they create the tone and mood? What does the passage add to the story?
5. When she relays the story of how Marietta's mother almost hanged herself (paras. 40–61), Euphemia presents the event as Marietta's version of what happened. How does Euphemia use that story to characterize her mother's family life and the relationship between her mother's parents? How might it be connected to Marietta's deep religious faith? Compare Euphemia's telling to Beryl's version of the same event (paras. 141–53). How do the two differ? What remains the same in both versions of the story?
6. Among the themes examined in "The Progress of Love" are self-delusion, personal identity, religious faith, family obligations, marriage, gender, and family. Choose one or two of these themes — or one that's not mentioned here — and discuss how Munro addresses and develops it. You might consider the ways she uses characterization, setting, dialogue, or point of view to build the theme or themes you have chosen.
7. This story contains several misunderstandings, or at least miscommunications. Trace one or two of them. What point do you think they make about the "progress of love"?
8. The narrator, who has already had three different names — Euphemia, Phemie, and Fame — says she would like to change her name to something simple like Joan but then asks herself, "unless I moved away from here, how could I do that?" (para. 32). What does this hesitation suggest about her character? How does it relate to some of the story's themes?
9. Compare Euphemia's twelve-year-old self to her present-day self. What characteristics remain the same? How do we know what happens — and doesn't happen — to her? What is the effect of having certain events (like her family's decision not to send Euphemia to school) happen offstage? Why do you think Fame (as she is known in adulthood) continues to tell some stories as truth even though she knows they are not, in fact, true?

POETRY

On My First Son

BEN JONSON

Ben Jonson (1572–1637) was a dominant force in English theater for much of his adult life and was widely regarded as the equal of Shakespeare. Born in London to an indigent widowed mother, he was encouraged to attend college. However, financial considerations compelled him to become a bricklayer, a trade Jonson "could not endure." He ultimately joined the army and fought for the Protestant cause in Holland. Returning to England in 1592, he took the London theater by storm. He tried his hand at both acting and directing, but it was in writing that he excelled. His early tragedies have not survived the ages, but his later comedies have, including *Every Man in His Humour* (1598), which was performed by a cast that included William Shakespeare, as well as *Volpone* (1606), *The Alchemist* (1610), and *Bartholomew Fair* (1614). He also wrote many masques (a genre now extinct) for the court of King James I and Queen Anne. "On My First Son" is an epitaph written after the death of Jonson's first son, Benjamin, at the age of seven.

Farewell, thou child of my right hand,[1] and joy;
My sin was too much hope of thee, loved boy:
Seven years thou wert lent to me, and I thee pay,
Exacted by thy fate, on the just day.
O could I lose all father now! For why
Will man lament the state he should envy,
To have so soon 'scaped world's and flesh's rage,
And, if no other misery, yet age?
Rest in soft peace, and asked, say, "Here doth lie
Ben Jonson his best piece of poetry."
For whose sake henceforth all his vows be such
As what he loves may never like too much.

[1616]

[1]Benjamin means "son of my right hand" in Hebrew. — EDS.

EXPLORING THE TEXT

1. In line 2 the speaker calls hope a "sin." How can this be?
2. How do you interpret the metaphor in lines 3–4, in which Ben Jonson compares his son's life to a loan? What does this comparison suggest about the speaker's faith and his resulting views on life?
3. How does the speaker attempt to console himself over the loss of his son? Identify language in the poem that demonstrates your point.
4. What does the speaker mean when he asks, "O could I lose all father now!" (l. 5)?
5. Why do you think the speaker calls his son "his best piece of poetry" (l. 10)? What does this suggest about the value he places on his poetry?
6. What do you make of the final lines of the epitaph? To whom does the "his" in line 11 refer to? What is the difference between the words "love" and "like" in the last line? What does the speaker vow in that line?

Before the Birth of One of Her Children

ANNE BRADSTREET

In 1630, Anne Bradstreet (1612/13–1678) and her husband, Simon, the son of a nonconformist minister, sailed to Massachusetts with Anne's parents. With *The Tenth Muse Lately Sprung Up in America* (1650) — possibly published in England without her knowledge — she became the first female poet in America. Because the Puritan community disdained female intellectual ambition, it was thought advisable to append the words "By a Gentle Woman in Those Parts," to reassure readers that Bradstreet was a diligent Puritan mother. Bradstreet's most remarkable poetry consists of thirty-five short reflective poems, explicit in their description of familial and marital love. Some of these appeared in the 1678 edition of *The Tenth Muse*; others remained hidden in her notebook until they were published in 1867. The twentieth century saw renewed interest in America's first female poet with John Berryman's poem "Homage to Mistress Bradstreet" (1956) and new editions of her work in 1967 and 1981. The mother of eight children, she writes of impending childbirth with apprehension and acceptance of the will of God in "Before the Birth of One of Her Children."

All things within this fading world hath end,
Adversity doth still our joys attend;
No ties so strong, no friends so dear and sweet,
But with death's parting blow is sure to meet.
The sentence past is most irrevocable,
A common thing, yet oh, inevitable.
How soon, my Dear, death may my steps attend,
How soon't may be thy lot to lose thy friend,
We both are ignorant, yet love bids me
These farewell lines to recommend to thee,
That when that knot's untied that made us one,
I may seem thine, who in effect am none.
And if I see not half my days that's due,
What nature would, God grant to yours and you;
The many faults that well you know I have
Let be interred in my oblivious grave;
If any worth or virtue were in me,
Let that live freshly in thy memory
And when thou feel'st no grief, as I no harms,
Yet love thy dead, who long lay in thine arms,
And when thy loss shall be repaid with gains
Look to my little babes, my dear remains.
And if thou love thyself, or loved'st me,
These O protect from stepdame's injury.
And if chance to thine eyes shall bring this verse,
With some sad sighs honor my absent hearse;
And kiss this paper for thy love's dear sake,
Who with salt tears this last farewell did take.

[1678]

EXPLORING THE TEXT

1. Anne Bradstreet had borne eight children, had lost two, and was battling tuberculosis when she wrote this poem. How are those circumstances reflected in the sentiments expressed in the poem? How is the poem itself not only last wishes but also a legacy to her children?
2. Restate the following line into simple language: "Adversity doth still our joys attend" (l. 2). What might the speaker mean by that statement in general, and how might it apply to her situation in particular?
3. How do you interpret the paradox in line 21? Explain the double meaning of "remains" in line 22.
4. Why do you think Bradstreet adds "if thou love thyself" to her qualification "or loved'st me" (l. 23)? What additional power does the "or" invoke?
5. Although the poem is presented without stanza breaks, it falls into sections. What are they? How do they form a sort of argument that the speaker is making?
6. How would you describe the tone of this poem? Try using a pair of words, such as "cautiously optimistic" or "fearful yet hopeful."

Sonnet: On Receiving a Letter Informing Me of the Birth of a Son

SAMUEL TAYLOR COLERIDGE

Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772–1834) was an influential English poet and literary critic best known for his poems *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* and *Kubla Khan*. Coleridge studied at Cambridge University but never received a degree. Throughout his life, Coleridge battled anxiety and depression and suffered from neuralgic and rheumatic pains. He was treated for these conditions with laudanum, which fostered an opium addiction. In 1795, Coleridge met poet William Wordsworth and in 1798, Coleridge and Wordsworth published a joint volume of poetry, *Lyrical Ballads*, signaling the beginning of the English romantic age. Although he was primarily known as a poet, most of Coleridge's poetry was not published until after his death, and he likely considered himself a philosopher and critic first. Coleridge's travels throughout Europe brought him into contact with transcendentalism, the critical philosophy of Immanuel Kant, and the German classical poet Friedrich Schiller, whose dramatic trilogy *Wallenstein* Coleridge translated into English. Coleridge was also an influential Shakespearean, delivering a series of lectures in 1810–1811. Before his seminal lecture on *Hamlet* in January 1812, critical consensus had been that *Hamlet* was one of Shakespeare's inferior works. In 1816, Coleridge finished *Biographia Literaria*, a volume blending autobiography, dissertations, and criticism. Coleridge died in 1834, leaving behind his unpublished *Opus Maximum*, a post-Kantian philosophical treatise. In "Sonnet: On Receiving a Letter Informing Me of the Birth of a Son," Coleridge reflects with his trademark mix of rapture and melancholy on the premature birth of his son Hartley.

When they did greet me father, sudden awe
Weigh'd down my spirit: I retired and knelt
Seeking the throne of grace, but inly felt
No heavenly visitation upwards draw
My feeble mind, nor cheering ray impart.
Ah me! before the Eternal Sire I brought
Th' unquiet silence of confused thought
And hopeless feelings: my o'erwhelmed heart
Trembled, and vacant tears stream'd down my face.
And now once more, O Lord! to thee I bend,
Lover of souls! and groan for future grace,
That ere my babe youth's perilous maze have trod,
Thy overshadowing Spirit may descend,
And he be born again, a child of God!

[1796]

EXPLORING THE TEXT

1. Trace the speaker's emotional state throughout the poem. What is his predominant emotion? How is that emotion communicated? Consider in particular the oxymoron ("unquiet silence") in line 7 or the strange turn of speech ("vacant tears") in line 9.
2. How would you characterize the speaker's attitude toward the news of his son's birth? What words or phrases are most revealing about his attitude?
3. What does the speaker wish for his son? Why do you think that wish seems so urgent for the speaker?
4. Look carefully at the punctuation in the first line. How would the meaning of the line change if there were a comma after "me"? How does that slight ambiguity connect with the rest of the poem?
5. How does the sonnet form suit the subject matter? Consider the rhyme scheme (*abba*, *cddc*, *effe*, *gg*) as well as the two quatrains and the couplet at the end.
6. Where does the poem deviate from the expected ten-syllable lines? What do you think these digressions from the sonnet form signal about the speaker's emotional state? How do they help convey the speaker's attitude?
7. In 1802, Samuel Taylor Coleridge wrote the "Letter to Sara Hutchinson," which was later published in part as "Dejection: An Ode." The unpublished part included the following lines:

   Those little Angel Children (woe is me!)
   There have been hours, when feeling how they bind
   And pluck out the Wing-feathers of my Mind . . .
   I have half-wish'd they never had been born!

   Compare these lines to the poem above. What seeds of Coleridge's ambivalence do you see in the sonnet?

We Are Seven

WILLIAM WORDSWORTH

William Wordsworth (1770–1850) is one of the most famous and influential poets of the Western world and one of the premier Romantics. Widely known for his reverence of nature and the power of his lyrical verse, he lived in the Lake District of northern England, where he was inspired by the natural beauty of the landscape. With Samuel Taylor Coleridge, he published *Lyrical Ballads* in 1798; the collection, which changed the direction of English poetry, begins with Coleridge's "Rime of the Ancient Mariner" and includes Wordsworth's "Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey." Among Wordsworth's other most famous works are "The World Is Too Much with Us" (p. 447), a sonnet; "Ode: Intimations of Immortality"; and "The Prelude, or Growth of a Poet's Mind," an autobiographical poem. "We Are Seven" first appeared in *Lyrical Ballads*.

— A simple Child,
That lightly draws its breath,
And feels its life in every limb,
What should it know of death?

I met a little cottage Girl:
She was eight years old, she said;
Her hair was thick with many a curl
That clustered round her head.

She had a rustic, woodland air,
And she was wildly clad:
Her eyes were fair, and very fair;
— Her beauty made me glad.

"Sisters and brothers, little Maid,
How many may you be?"
"How many? Seven in all," she said,
And wondering looked at me.

"And where are they? I pray you tell."
She answered, "Seven are we;
And two of us at Conway dwell,
And two are gone to sea.

"Two of us in the church-yard lie,
My sister and my brother;
And, in the church-yard cottage, I
Dwell near them with my mother."

"You say that two at Conway dwell,
And two are gone to sea,
Yet ye are seven! — I pray you tell,
Sweet Maid, how this may be."

Then did the little Maid reply,
"Seven boys and girls are we;
Two of us in the church-yard lie,
Beneath the church-yard tree."

"You run about, my little Maid,
Your limbs they are alive;
If two are in the church-yard laid,
Then ye are only five."

"Their graves are green, they may be seen,"
The little Maid replied,
"Twelve steps or more from my mother's door,
And they are side by side.

"My stockings there I often knit,
My kerchief there I hem;
And there upon the ground I sit,
And sing a song to them.

"And often after sunset, Sir,
When it is light and fair,
I take my little porringer,
And eat my supper there.

"The first that died was sister Jane;
In bed she moaning lay,
Till God released her of her pain;
And then she went away.

"So in the church-yard she was laid;
And, when the grass was dry,
Together round her grave we played,
My brother John and I.

"And when the ground was white with snow,
And I could run and slide,
My brother John was forced to go,
And he lies by her side."

"How many are you, then," said I,
"If they two are in heaven?"
Quick was the little Maid's reply,
"O Master! we are seven."

"But they are dead; those two are dead!
Their spirits are in heaven!"
'T was throwing words away; for still
The little Maid would have her will,
And said, "Nay, we are seven!"

[1798]

EXPLORING THE TEXT

1. What concrete details help the reader picture the "little cottage Girl"? For instance, what does the speaker mean in line 11 when he says, "Her eyes were fair, and very fair"? Why is the setting important to the tale being told?
2. In the first stanza, the speaker raises a question that is explored in subsequent stanzas through a dialogue between him and the little girl. Note how the speaker asks again and again how many children are in the little girl's family and how her answer never wavers. What effect does this repetition have on your understanding of the poem?
3. How would you characterize the little girl's attitude toward her dead sister and brother? What is the logic leading to her conclusion that "we are seven"? Does William Wordsworth present the girl sympathetically or critically?
4. What does the girl understand about the nature of family and the death of family members that the

ostensibly more experienced speaker has yet to learn? By the end, has she altered the speaker's view?

5. In his preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (1802), Wordsworth states that he wants his poetry to be written in "the real language of men," not the more elaborate language associated with elevated literary efforts. How well does "We Are Seven" achieve this goal? Is the regular rhyme and rhythm scheme in keeping with this goal? What about the repetition? What examples of figurative language do you find?

A Prayer for My Daughter

WILLIAM BUTLER YEATS

William Butler Yeats (1865–1939) was born in Dublin to a middle-class Protestant family with strong connections to England. The young Yeats spent his childhood in the west of Ireland, a region that remained a profound influence on his work. Yeats began as a playwright, founding the Irish Literary Theatre in 1899, and wrote several plays celebrating Irish cultural tradition. The most important of these are *Cathleen ni Houlihan* (1902), *The King's Threshold* (1904), and *Deirdre* (1907). His early plays earned him the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1923. By 1912, he had turned to writing poetry. Profoundly influenced by the poetry of William Blake, Yeats's work reflects Ireland's rich mythology and a fascination with the occult. His collections include *The Wild Swans at Coole* (1919), *Michael Robartes and the Dancer* (1921), *The Tower* (1928), and *The Winding Stair* (1933). Written at the age of fifty-four, "A Prayer for My Daughter" (1919) reflects the uncertainties of an aging father raising a daughter in a tumultuous world.

Once more the storm is howling, and half hid
Under this cradle-hood and coverlid
My child sleeps on. There is no obstacle
But Gregory's wood and one bare hill
Whereby the haystack- and roof-levelling wind,
Bred on the Atlantic, can be stayed;
And for an hour I have walked and prayed
Because of the great gloom that is in my mind.

I have walked and prayed for this young child
an hour
And heard the sea-wind scream upon the tower,
And under the arches of the bridge, and scream
In the elms above the flooded stream;
Imagining in excited reverie
That the future years had come,
Dancing to a frenzied drum,
Out of the murderous innocence of the sea.

May she be granted beauty and yet not
Beauty to make a stranger's eye distraught,
Or hers before a looking-glass, for such,
Being made beautiful overmuch,
Consider beauty a sufficient end,
Lose natural kindness and maybe
The heart-revealing intimacy
That chooses right, and never find a friend.

Helen being chosen found life flat and dull
And later had much trouble from a fool,
While that great Queen, that rose out of the
spray,
Being fatherless could have her way
Yet chose a bandy-leggèd smith for man.
It's certain that fine women eat
A crazy salad with their meat
Whereby the Horn of Plenty is undone.

In courtesy I'd have her chiefly learned;
Hearts are not had as a gift but hearts are earned
By those that are not entirely beautiful;
Yet many, that have played the fool
For beauty's very self, has charm made wise.
And many a poor man that has roved,
Loved and thought himself beloved,
From a glad kindness cannot take his eyes.

May she become a flourishing hidden tree
That all her thoughts may like the linnet be,
And have no business but dispensing round
Their magnanimities of sound,
Nor but in merriment begin a chase,
Nor but in merriment a quarrel.
O may she live like some green laurel
Rooted in one dear perpetual place.

My mind, because the minds that I have loved,
The sort of beauty that I have approved,
Prosper but little, has dried up of late,
Yet knows that to be choked with hate
May well be of all evil chances chief.
If there's no hatred in a mind
Assault and battery of the wind
Can never tear the linnet from the leaf.

An intellectual hatred is the worst,
So let her think opinions are accursed.
Have I not seen the loveliest woman born
Out of the mouth of Plenty's horn,
Because of her opinionated mind
Barter that horn and every good
By quiet natures understood
For an old bellows full of angry wind?

Considering that, all hatred driven hence,
The soul recovers radical innocence
And learns at last that it is self-delighting,
Self-appeasing, self-affrighting,
And that its own sweet will is Heaven's will;
She can, though every face should scowl
And every windy quarter howl
Or every bellows burst, be happy still.

And may her bridegroom bring her to a house
Where all's accustomed, ceremonious;
For arrogance and hatred are the wares
Peddled in the thoroughfares.
How but in custom and in ceremony
Are innocence and beauty born?
Ceremony's a name for the rich horn,
And custom for the spreading laurel tree.

[1919]

EXPLORING THE TEXT

1. What contrasts does the opening stanza establish? Consider the settings inside and outside, as well as the speaker's frame of mind.
2. Why is the speaker skeptical of "Being made beautiful overmuch" (l. 20)? What does he see as the dangers of extraordinary beauty? How do the allusions to Helen of Troy and Aphrodite ("that great Queen, that rose out of the spray," l. 27) support the speaker's views on beauty?
3. What does the speaker mean when he wishes for his daughter to "become a flourishing hidden tree" with thoughts "like the linnet be" (ll. 41–42)? What does this wish suggest about the future he envisions for his child? How do you interpret his desire that she be "Rooted in one dear perpetual place" (l. 48)? What are the alternatives to being a hidden tree with thoughts like a linnet?
4. What is the effect of the repeated construction "May she" (ll. 17, 41, 47)? What difference would it have made if William Butler Yeats had written "I hope she"?
5. In stanza 5, the speaker says, "In courtesy I'd have her chiefly learned" (l. 33). What is the meaning he attaches to the term "courtesy"? How might his concept of courtesy sum up the qualities he believes lead to a satisfying life?
6. Examine Yeats's use of figurative language. How do you interpret the image of the "Horn of Plenty" (l. 32), for instance, or "like some green laurel / Rooted in one dear perpetual place" (ll. 47–48)?

What does the oxymoron "murderous innocence" (l. 16) mean? What effect does the personification of nature have?

7. What are the values the speaker wants his daughter to embrace? Which ones does he want her to avoid?
8. Based on the poem's final two stanzas, how would you describe the father's vision of an ideal woman? Pay careful attention to his use of the word "innocence" in these stanzas.
9. What might the setting of this poem represent? How does this setting affect the tone of this poem?
10. Why is this poem entitled "A Prayer for My Daughter"? What elements of prayer are embodied here?
11. Is the vision that Yeats favors for his daughter one that reflects stereotypical views of women? What elements of the poem might lend themselves to such an interpretation? What is your interpretation?

Mother to Son

LANGSTON HUGHES

Langston Hughes (1902–1967) grew up in the African American community of Joplin, Missouri. He spent a year at Columbia University and became involved with the Harlem movement, but was shocked by the endemic racial prejudice at the university and subsequently left. Hughes traveled for several years, spending some time in Paris before returning to the United States. He completed his BA at Pennsylvania's Lincoln University in 1929, after which he returned to Harlem for the remainder of his life. Hughes's output was prolific in verse, prose, and drama. His first volume of poetry, *The Weary Blues*, was published in 1926. This collection contained "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," perhaps his most famous poem. His first novel, *Not Without Laughter* (1930), won the Harmon Gold Medal for literature. He is remembered for his celebration of the uniqueness of African American culture, which found expression in "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" (1926), published in the *Nation*, and in the poem "My People." He also wrote children's poetry, musicals, and opera. This poem, "Mother to Son," expresses a mother's advice to her son with its famous refrain, "Life for me ain't been no crystal stair."

Well, son, I'll tell you:
Life for me ain't been no crystal stair.
It's had tacks in it,
And splinters,
And boards torn up,
And places with no carpet on the floor —
Bare.
But all the time
I'se been a-climbin' on,
And reachin' landin's,
And turnin' corners,
And sometimes goin' in the dark
Where there ain't been no light.

So boy, don't you turn back.
Don't you set down on the steps
'Cause you finds it's kinder hard.
Don't you fall now—
For I'se still goin', honey,
I'se still climbin',
And life for me ain't been no crystal stair.

[1922]

EXPLORING THE TEXT

1. What is the overall message the mother is trying to convey to her son?
2. Based on details in the poem, how would you characterize the mother?
3. The poem's speaker employs an extended metaphor to explain her life to her son. What do you think the "crystal stair" symbolizes (l. 2)? Why do you think the poet has chosen to repeat this image in the final line? What might the details of tacks, splinters, landings, and corners represent? What does the inclusion of these images suggest about the mother's relationship with her son?
4. What effect do colloquial expressions and dialect have on your understanding of the speaker? What effect do they have on the meaning of the poem?
5. How old is the son being addressed? Does he seem to be at some sort of crossroads? Cite specific textual evidence to support your viewpoint.
6. Is the mother in this poem lecturing, apologizing, advising, pleading, showing affection, criticizing? How would you characterize the tone of the poem?
7. Even though the poem is presented without stanza breaks, there are "turns," or shifts. What are they? Try reciting or performing the poem; where would you emphasize the pauses? How do these breaks influence or emphasize meaning?

The Writer

RICHARD WILBUR

Richard Wilbur (b. 1921) is an American poet and translator. He grew up in New York City and graduated from Amherst College in 1942. After serving in the army during World War II, Wilbur attended graduate school at Harvard University and went on to teach at Wellesley College, Wesleyan University, and Smith College. Wilbur has published thirteen poetry collections. *Things of This World* (1957) won a Pulitzer Prize and a National Book Award. Wilbur won a second Pulitzer Prize for his *New and Collected Poems* (1989). He has also written two books of prose and translated numerous plays by the French dramatists Molière, Jean Racine, and Pierre Corneille. Wilbur's poetry often illuminates epiphany in everyday experiences, a quality on full display in "The Writer."

In her room at the prow of the house
Where light breaks, and the windows are tossed with linden,
My daughter is writing a story.

I pause in the stairwell, hearing
From her shut door a commotion of typewriter-keys
Like a chain hauled over a gunwale.

Young as she is, the stuff
Of her life is a great cargo, and some of it heavy:
I wish her a lucky passage.

But now it is she who pauses,
As if to reject my thought and its easy figure.
A stillness greatens, in which

The whole house seems to be thinking,
And then she is at it again with a bunched clamor
Of strokes, and again is silent.

I remember the dazed starling
Which was trapped in that very room, two years ago;
How we stole in, lifted a sash

And retreated, not to affright it;
And how for a helpless hour, through the crack of the door,
We watched the sleek, wild, dark

And iridescent creature
Batter against the brilliance, drop like a glove
To the hard floor, or the desk-top.

And wait then, humped and bloody.
For the wits to try it again; and how our spirits
Rose when, suddenly sure,

It lifted off from a chair-back,
Beating a smooth course for the right window
And clearing the sill of the world.

It is always a matter, my darling,
Of life or death, as I had forgotten. I wish
What I wished you before, but harder.

[1969]

EXPLORING THE TEXT

1. You probably noticed that the central image of the first three stanzas of "The Writer" is the house depicted as a ship at sea. What mood does the image set? What diction choices develop that image, and how might they be connected to the poem's subject? What does the image tell you about the speaker's family life? about the life of a writer?
2. What do you make of the word "passage" in line 9? What are some of its possible meanings? How do the word's multiple meanings help the speaker comment on the act of writing?
3. The story of the starling in the room is at once literal and metaphoric. What do you think it represents? Explain your answer.
4. What do you think the speaker means by "easy figure" (l.11)? Consider several possible meanings.
5. At the end of the poem, the speaker says, "I wish / What I wished you before, but harder." What do you think that wish was? What do you think the speaker means by "but harder"?
6. What is the connection between the speaker's attitude toward writing and his attitude toward his daughter? How do Richard Wilbur's language choices help develop this connection?
7. In an interview with the *Paris Review*, Wilbur said that "there has to be a sudden, confident sense that there is an exploitable and interesting relationship between something perceived out there and something in the way of incipient meaning within you. . . . Noting a likeness or resemblance between two things in nature can provide this freshness, but I think there must be more." In what ways does "The Writer" take the relationship between "something out there" and something within the speaker to a level beyond just resemblance?

My Father's Song

SIMON J. ORTIZ

Simon J. Ortiz (b. 1941) is the author of more than twenty-five books of poetry, short fiction, and nonfiction. A member of the Acoma Pueblo tribe, Ortiz grew up near Albuquerque, New Mexico. He attended Fort Lewis College, served three years in the military, and then attended the University of New Mexico before earning an MFA in writing from the University of Iowa in 1969. Since 1968, Ortiz has taught creative writing and Native American literature at many institutions, and he currently teaches at Arizona State University, where he is the founder and coordinator of the Indigenous Speakers Series. His most well-known works are the poetry collection *From Sand Creek* (1981), which won a Pushcart Prize, and *Woven Stone* (1992), a work that combines poetry and prose from three of his previous books. In "My Father's Song," Ortiz evokes both the power of familial memory and a tender reverence for nature.

Wanting to say things,
I miss my father tonight.
His voice, the slight catch,
the depth from his thin chest,
the tremble of emotion

5

in something he has just said
to his son, his song:

We planted corn one Spring at Avcu —
we planted several times
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;
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
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
of cool and warm sand and tiny alive mice
and my father saying things.

[1977]

EXPLORING THE TEXT

1. "My Father's Song" has two different speakers. How can you tell which is which? How are the speakers different? How are they the same? Is there a point where the two meld together?
2. Why do you think the speaker calls his memory of his father a song?
3. Why do you think the poem opens with "Wanting to say things, / I miss my father tonight"? What do you think has made this particular night so important? What are some of the specific things the speaker misses about his father?
4. Simon J. Ortiz is considered a master of tactile imagery. Find examples of it in "My Father's Song." How are those images created and reinforced?
5. How does the structure of "My Father's Song" help convey what the speaker misses about his father?
6. Ortiz is a member of the Acoma Pueblo tribe. "Acu" (l. 8) is another word for Acoma. What aspects of this poem seem particularly tied to Native American culture and traditions? What aspects of it are universal?

My Father and the Figtree

NAOMI SHIHAB NYE

Naomi Shihab Nye (b. 1952) is a Palestinian American poet, novelist, editor, and political activist. Her works for children include the picture book *Sitti's Secret* (1994) and the novel *Habibi* (1997). Her poetry collections include *Different Ways to Pray* (1980), *Fuel* (1998), *19 Varieties of Gazelle: Poems of the Middle East* (2002), *You and Yours* (2005), *Honeybee* (2008), and *Tender Spot: Selected Poems* (2009). Nye describes herself as "a wandering poet" and has been a visiting writer all over the world. Her many awards include four Pushcart Prizes, the Jane Addams Children's Book award, and the Paterson Poetry Prize. Nye was elected a Chancellor of the Academy of American Poets in 2009, and in 2013 she was awarded both the Robert Creeley Award and the NSK Neustadt Prize for Children's Literature. In "My Father and the Figtree," a poem from her collection *Different Ways to Pray*, the speaker chronicles changes in her father's life through his cultural associations with a fig tree.

For other fruits my father was indifferent.
He'd point at the cherry trees and say,
"See those? I wish they were figs."
In the evening he sat by our beds
weaving folktales like vivid little scarves.
They always involved a figtree.
Even when it didn't fit, he'd stick it in.
Once Joha[1] was walking down the road
and he saw a figtree.
Or, he tied his camel to a figtree and went to sleep.
Or, later when they caught and arrested him,
his pockets were full of figs.

At age six I ate a dried fig and shrugged.
"That's not what I'm talking about!" he said,
"I'm talking about a fig straight from the earth
gift of Allah! — on a branch so heavy
it touches the ground.
I'm talking about picking the largest, fattest, sweetest fig
in the world and putting it in my mouth."
(Here he'd stop and close his eyes.)

Years passed, we lived in many houses,
none had figtrees.
We had lima beans, zucchini, parsley, beets.
"Plant one!" my mother said,
but my father never did.

[1] A trickster character in Middle East folktales. — EDS.

He tended garden half-heartedly, forgot to water,
let the okra get too big.
"What a dreamer he is. Look how many
things he starts and doesn't finish."

The last time he moved, I had a phone call,
My father, in Arabic, chanting a song
I'd never heard. "What's that?"
He took me out back to the new yard.
There, in the middle of Dallas, Texas,
a tree with the largest, fattest,
sweetest figs in the world.
"It's a figtree song!" he said,
plucking his fruits like ripe tokens,
emblems, assurance
of a world that was always his own.

[1980]

EXPLORING THE TEXT

1. What does the fig tree mean to the speaker's father? Why is the speaker's father "indifferent" (l. 1) to other fruits? What does the fig tree mean to the speaker? How do you know?
2. Describe how the poem shifts after the speaker says, "Years passed, we lived in many houses / none had figtrees" (ll. 20–21). What has changed in the speaker's attitude toward her father?
3. Why does the father refuse to plant a fig tree and instead "He tended garden halfheartedly, forgot to water, / let the okra get too big" (ll. 26–27)?
4. How do you interpret the final two lines? Why are figs "emblems, assurance / of a world that was always his own"? Do you have tokens or emblems of your background that make your world your own? Describe them.
5. What qualities of traditional storytelling do you see in "My Father and the Figtree"? What does Naomi Shihab Nye's use of what is traditionally a prose form tell us about the speaker's father? About the speaker?
6. In what ways does "My Father and the Figtree" connect the natural world to the immigrant experience? How does that connection help ease the difficulty of displacement for the speaker and her father?
7. Apart from two similes, Nye uses very little figurative language in this poem. Why do you think she decided to limit the poem in this way? What other resources of language does Nye use to give the poem its power?

Wild Geese

MARY OLIVER

Mary Oliver (b. 1935) was born in Maple Heights, Ohio, an affluent suburb of Cleveland. She attended Ohio State University and Vassar College, but did not complete her degree. Nonetheless, she has held several teaching positions at colleges, including Bennington College. Oliver published her first volume, *No Voyage, and Other Poems*, in 1963 at the age of twenty-eight, and in 1984 won the Pulitzer Prize with *American Primitive* (1983). Following a period of silence, she published a considerable body of prose and verse between 1990 and 2006, winning the Christopher Award and the L. L. Winship/PEN New England Award for *House of Light* (1990), and the National Book Award for *New and Selected Poems* (1992). These were followed by *White Pine* (1994), *West Wind* (1997), *Winter Hours: Prose, Prose Poems, and Poems* (1999), *Owls and Other Fantasies: Poems and Essays* (2003), *Why I Wake Early* (2004), and *Thirst* (2006), *Red Bird* (2008), and, most recently, *Felicity* (2015). The sense of community with nature is ever-present in her work, as in "Wild Geese," a poem exploring the place of humankind in "the family of things."

You do not have to be good.
You do not have to walk on your knees
for a hundred miles through the desert, repenting.
You only have to let the soft animal of your body love what it loves.
Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.
Meanwhile the world goes on.
Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain
are moving across the landscapes,
over the prairies and the deep trees,
the mountains and the rivers.
Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air,
are heading home again.
Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,
the world offers itself to your imagination,
calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting—
over and over announcing your place
in the family of things.

[1986]

EXPLORING THE TEXT

1. Why do you think Mary Oliver chose to address readers directly as "You" in the opening lines of her poem? What effect does this have on your reading of the poem?

2. Even in the absence of a regular rhyme scheme or rhythm, the language of this poem seems to have an incantatory or hypnotic quality. How does Oliver achieve this effect?

3. Why does Oliver compare the way the world calls to us with the call of wild geese? What do wild geese represent in this poem? Why is it important that they "are heading home again" (l. 12)? Are the geese metaphorical? What might Oliver be suggesting about homing instincts in both birds and humans?
4. What does the phrase "no matter how lonely" (l. 13) suggest about the speaker's assumptions regarding her audience? What does the phrase suggest about the poem's purpose? How does that description link to the opening sentence?
5. How do you interpret the line "the world offers itself to your imagination" (l. 14)?
6. How does the nature imagery throughout this poem help us understand what Oliver means by "the family of things" (l. 17)? Overall, do you find this poem sad or hopeful?

My Father's Geography

AFAA MICHAEL WEAVER

Afaa Michael Weaver (b. 1951) is a poet, short story writer, and editor from Baltimore, Maryland. He earned a BA in literature from Excelsior College and an MA in playwriting and theater at Brown University. Weaver has published fourteen full-length poetry collections and has been awarded a Pew Fellowship in the Arts (1998), a Fulbright Scholarship to study in Taiwan (2002), the Kingsley Tufts Poetry Award (2014), and several Pushcart Prizes (2008, 2013, 2014). Weaver was also the first poet named an elder of the Cave Canem Foundation, an organization active in promoting African American poets. Weaver is currently an Alumnae Professor of English at Simmons College. In "My Father's Geography" Weaver explores his own connection to and separation from Africa while abroad in Europe.

I was parading the Côte d'Azur,
hopping the short trains from Nice to Cannes,
following the maze of streets in Monte Carlo
to the hill that overlooks the ville.[1]

A woman fed me paté in the afternoon,
calling from her stall to offer me more.
At breakfast I talked in French with an old man
about what he loved about America — the Kennedys.

On the beaches I walked and watched
topless women sunbathe and swim,
loving both home and being so far from it.

At a phone looking to Africa over the Mediterranean,
I called my father, and, missing me, he said,
"You almost home boy. Go on cross that sea!"

[1992]

[1] City. — EDS.

EXPLORING THE TEXT

1. Why do you think the poem is titled "My Father's Geography"?
2. How would you characterize the speaker? What kind of person is he? How is he defined by his travels? by his relationship with his father?
4. What does the speaker mean when he says he loves "both home and being so far from it" (l. 12)?
5. What are some possible meanings for the phrase "missing me" (l. 13)? What effect do those different meanings have on your understanding of the father's exhortation in the last line?
6. You may have noticed that "My Father's Geography" has fourteen lines. What other aspects of the poem might qualify it as a sonnet? How does that form contribute to the meaning of the poem? In what ways does the poem defy the formal conventions of a sonnet? How does this deviation from form affect the poem?

The Hammock

LI-YOUNG LEE

Li-Young Lee (b. 1957) was born to an elite Chinese family. His great-grandfather had been China's first republican president (1912–1916), and his father had been a personal physician to Mao Zedong. Despite the latter association, his family fled from China when the People's Republic was established in 1948, settling in Jakarta, where Lee was born. An increasing anti-Chinese movement in Indonesia drove the family from the country, and after a futile search for a permanent home in turbulent Asia, they settled in the United States in 1964. Lee was educated at the University of Pittsburgh, where he began to write. He later attended the University of Arizona and the State University of New York at Brockport. Lee's first collection of poetry was *Rose* (1986), which won the Delmore Schwartz Memorial Award from New York University. This was followed by *The City in Which I Love You* (1990), which won the Lamont Poetry Prize; *Book of My Nights* (2001); and his most recent publication, *Behind My Eyes* (2008). He has also published a personal memoir, *The Wingéd Seed: A Remembrance* (1995). Like much of Lee's poetry, "The Hammock," first published in the *Kenyon Review*, explores the interplay of the eternal and the everyday.

When I lay my head in my mother's lap
I think how day hides the stars,
the way I lay hidden once, waiting
inside my mother's singing to herself. And I remember
how she carried me on her back
between home and the kindergarten,
once each morning and once each afternoon.

I don't know what my mother's thinking.

When my son lays his head in my lap, I wonder:
Do his father's kisses keep his father's worries
from becoming his? I think, *Dear God,* and remember
there are stars we haven't heard from yet:
They have so far to arrive. *Amen,*
I think, and I feel almost comforted.

I've no idea what my child is thinking.

Between two unknowns, I live my life.
Between my mother's hopes, older than I am
by coming before me, and my child's wishes, older than I am
by outliving me. And what's it like?
Is it a door, and good-bye on either side?
A window, and eternity on either side?
Yes, and a little singing between two great rests.

[2000]

EXPLORING THE TEXT

1. What are the connotations of the word *hammock*? How do these connotations contribute to your understanding of the poem?
2. Find the visual and tactile images in the poem. What do these images suggest about the relationships described? Pay careful attention to the descriptions of physical positions.
3. Why do you think the poet chose to italicize the words "*Dear God*" (l. 11) and "*Amen*" (l. 13)? What does this tell you about the speaker's attitude toward his subject? How does this point the way to the poem's tone?
4. Why do the stars "have so far to arrive" (l. 13)? Those stars are in the same stanza as the father's "kisses" (l. 10) and "worries" (l. 10). How might the three be related?
5. What evidence is there in the poem — both words and images — of the speaker's tentativeness? For example, he feels "almost comforted" in line 14. He asks two questions at the very end and replies, "Yes" (l. 22) — but to which question is he responding? What is the source of this uncertainty? Does the speaker ultimately get beyond it, embrace it, or resign himself to it?
6. How did you interpret the poem's final stanza? What are the "two unknowns" (l. 16)? What are the "two great rests" (l. 22)? What do these images suggest about how the speaker lives his life?
7. Examine the structure of this poem by comparing stanzas one and three to stanzas two and four. How does the shape of the poem reflect its title and theme?

Whose Mouth Do I Speak With

SUZANNE RANCOURT

Suzanne Rancourt (b. 1959) is a Native American poet, educator, and elder of the Abenaki Bear Clan. She grew up in west central Maine and has served in the U.S. Marine Corps and U.S. Army. Rancourt earned an MFA in poetry from Vermont College and an MA in Educational Psychology from the University at Albany, SUNY. Her first book of poems, *Billboard in the Clouds* (2001), won the Native Writers' Circle of the Americas First Book Award. Her work has also been featured in several anthologies, including *The Journal of Military Experience, Vol. 2* (2012) and *In the Trenches: The Psychological Impact of War* (2015). Rancourt is also the managing editor for *Blue Streak: A Journal of Military Poetry*. In "Whose Mouth Do I Speak With," Rancourt's speaker reflects on her Native American heritage, bringing to life a childhood memory of her father.

I can remember my father bringing home spruce gum.
He worked in the woods and filled his pockets
with golden chunks of pitch.
For his children
he provided this special sacrament
and we'd gather at this feet, around his legs,
bumping his lunchbox, and his empty thermos rattled inside.
Our skin would stick to Daddy's gluey clothing
and we'd smell like Mumma's Pine Sol.
We had no money for store bought gum
but that's all right.
The spruce gum
was so close to chewing amber
as though in our mouths we held the eyes of Coyote
and how many other children had fathers
that placed on their innocent, anxious tongue
the blood of tree?

[2004]

EXPLORING THE TEXT

1. Spruce gum is the sap of the spruce tree that has hardened into resin; it is sometimes chewed like gum. When it hardens further, it becomes amber. According to one blogger from Maine, "You can't forget how the gum first crumbles, releasing a powerful taste of the spruce forest, then comes back together and settles down (after you spit out the impurities) into a nice, long lasting, lavender colored chew." How does this description of spruce gum inform your reading of the poem? What do you think spruce gum represents for the speaker?
2. Why does the speaker refer to her father bringing home spruce gum as a "sacrament" (l. 5)? How is the idea of a sacrament developed throughout the poem?
3. Consider the poem's imagery. What senses do the images appeal to? How does the imagery convey the speaker's attitude toward her father? her

childhood? What does the imagery imply about the larger meanings these memories have for her as an adult?

4. In Native American tradition, Coyote (l. 14) is often a trickster, usually imagined and portrayed with yellow — or amber — eyes. How does Coyote connect some of the images in "Whose Mouth Do I Speak With"?

5. How does the poem answer the question of the poem's title? In what ways is the answer left open to interpretation? Whose mouth does the speaker speak with?

My Husband

REBECCA HAZELTON

Rebecca Hazelton (b. 1978) is an award-winning poet, editor, and critic. After attending Davidson College, Hazelton went on to earn an MFA from the University of Notre Dame and a PhD from Florida State University. Hazelton was a 2010–2011 Jay C. and Ruth Hall Poetry Fellow at the University of Wisconsin–Madison Creative Writing Institute, and her third full-length book of poetry, *Vow* (2012), won the Cleveland State Poetry Center Open Competition Prize. She is the author of two other full-length books of poetry, *Fair Copy* (2012) and *Bad Star* (2013). She has taught at Beloit College and Oklahoma State University. In "My Husband," Hazelton's speaker paints a vivid, idealized portrait of her husband.

My husband in the house.
My husband on the lawn,
pushing the mower, 4th of July, the way
my husband's sweat wends like Crown Royale
to the waistband
of his shorts,
the slow motion shake of the head the water
running down his chest,
all of this lit like a Poison[1] video:
Cherry Pie[2] his cutoffs his blond hair his air guitar crescendo.
My husband
at the PTA meeting.
My husband warming milk
at 3 a.m. while I sleep.
My husband washing the white Corvette the bare chest and the soap,
the objectification of my husband
by the pram pushers
and mailman.
My husband at Home Depot asking

[1] An American rock band that was particularly popular from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s. — EDS.

[2] A popular song by the rock band Warrant, recorded in 1990. The music video includes a blonde woman in cutoffs playing the air guitar. It was banned from a Canadian TV network for being "offensively sexist." — EDS.

where the bolts are,
the nuts, the screws,
my god, it's filthy
my husband reading from the news,
my husband cooking French toast, Belgian waffles,
my husband for all
nationalities.
My husband with a scotch, my husband
with his shoes off,
his slippers on, my husband's golden
leg hairs in the glow of a reading lamp.
My husband bearded, my husband shaved, the way my husband
taps out the razor, the small hairs
in the sink,
my husband with tweezers
to my foot,
to the splinter I carried
for years,
my husband chiding me
for waiting
to remove what pained me,
my husband brandishing aloft
the sliver to the light, and laughing.

[2015]

EXPLORING THE TEXT

1. The poem opens with a long, detailed description of the speaker's husband mowing the lawn, "all of this lit like a Poison video" (l. 9). What aspects of "My Husband" are like a music video? Consider film techniques such as framing, close-ups, and lighting. How do those details help Rebecca Hazelton paint a picture of her feelings about her husband?
2. What might the "sliver" in the poem's last line represent? Why do you think the husband is laughing?
3. Look carefully at the structure of "My Husband." What do you notice about the position of the lines and the lengths of the lines? What effect do those choices have on the poem's mood?
4. How would you describe the tone of "My Husband"? Consider Hazelton's use of repetition, varying line lengths, imagery, and hyperbole.
5. Discuss whether you think "My Husband" objectifies the speaker's husband, supporting your position with evidence from the poem itself.

PAIRED POEMS

My Papa's Waltz

THEODORE ROETHKE

Theodore Roethke (1908–1963) was born in Saginaw, Michigan. His early years spent in the family greenhouse business brought him close to nature and to his father, who died suddenly when Roethke was fifteen, a loss that looms large in the poem "My Papa's Waltz." After graduating from the University of Michigan, he did brief stints at law school and at Harvard University before the Great Depression compelled him to find work teaching at Lafayette College. He continued to teach throughout his life. Roethke first became popular after favorable reviews for *Open House* in 1941. He then won numerous prizes for his work throughout the 1950s and 1960s, including National Book Awards for both *Words for the Wind* (1957) and *The Far Field* (1964). The meeting of the mystical and the natural is at the center of his work — a meeting that fascinated such earlier poets as William Blake and William Wordsworth, both of whom were strong influences on Roethke's poetry. "My Papa's Waltz" is his most famous, and oft-interpreted, poem.

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

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

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

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

[1948]

EXPLORING THE TEXT

1. How would you characterize the relationship between the father and the son in this poem?
2. Consider the two figures of speech in the poem: the simile of "hung on like death" (l. 3) and the metaphor of "waltzing" throughout the poem. What do they add to the story line of the poem? Imagine, for instance, if the title were changed to "My Papa" or "Dancing with My Father."
3. How do you interpret the lines "My mother's countenance / Could not unfrown itself" (ll. 7–8)? Is she angry? jealous? worried? frightened? disapproving? Why doesn't she take action or step in?
4. Manuscripts show that Theodore Roethke started writing this poem as a portrait of a daughter and her father. Explain why you think having a girl at the center of this poem would or would not affect your response to it.
5. What is the effect of the regular rhyme and rhythm scheme of the poem? In what ways does it mimic a waltz?
6. Some interpret this poem to be about an abusive father-son relationship, while others read it quite differently. How do you interpret it? Use textual evidence from the poem to explain your reading.

Those Winter Sundays

ROBERT HAYDEN

Born Asa Bundy Sheffey in Detroit, Michigan, Robert Hayden (1913–1980) was raised both in a dysfunctional family and in an equally dysfunctional foster home just next door. The turmoil of his childhood was complicated by his extreme nearsightedness, which excluded him from most activities other than reading. Hayden attended Detroit City College (now Wayne State University) before studying under W. H. Auden in the graduate English program at the University of Michigan. In 1976, he was appointed consultant in poetry to the Library of Congress, a post that was the forerunner to that of U.S. poet laureate. His first volume, *Heart-Shape in the Dust* (1940), took its voice from the Harlem Renaissance and impressed W. H. Auden with its originality. Later work continued to garner critical praise, including his epic poem on the *Amistad* mutiny, "Middle Passage," and *A Ballad of Remembrance* (1962), which includes his most famous poem, "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
banked fires blaze. No one ever thanked him.

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

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

[1962]

EXPLORING THE TEXT

1. What are the different time frames of this poem, and when does the poem shift from flashback to present day? How does Robert Hayden keep this shift from seeming abrupt?
2. What does the line "fearing the chronic angers of that house" (l. 9) suggest about the son's relationship with his father and the kind of home he grew up in?
3. What is the meaning of "love's austere and lonely offices" (l. 14)? What effect does Hayden achieve by choosing such an uncommon, somewhat archaic term as "offices"?
4. What is the tone of this poem? How do the specific details of the setting the speaker describes contribute to that tone? Consider also how the literal descriptions act as metaphors. What, for instance, is "blueblack cold" (l. 2)?
5. Notice the poem's shift between father and son, from "him" to "I." How does this alternation contribute to your understanding of the poem?
6. What contrasts do you see in the poem? Identify at least three, and discuss how they work individually and collectively.
7. What is the son's feeling about his father? Could this poem be read as a son's belated thank you? Explain your answer. What does the adult speaker in the poem understand about his father that he did not as a child? What is the effect of the repetition in the last two lines?
8. In poetry, the lyric is usually a short poem expressing personal feelings and may take the form of a song set to music. What music would you choose to convey the tone and themes of "Those Winter Sundays"?

FOCUS ON COMPARISON AND CONTRAST

1. "My Papa's Waltz" and "Those Winter Sundays" are both poems in which the speakers remember their fathers. What are the similarities in their descriptions of their fathers? What are the differences?
2. One poem rhymes; the other doesn't. How does the choice to rhyme or not affect the meaning of each poem? How does that decision affect the character of the speaker?
3. How would you characterize the mood in each of these poems? How do they differ from each other? What are the similarities?

WRITING ASSIGNMENT

In "My Papa's Waltz" and "Those Winter Sundays," each speaker contemplates his fraught relationship with his father, sharing memories of their interactions. Read both poems carefully. Then write an essay in which you compare and contrast the poems, analyzing the techniques each poet uses to depict the speaker's attitude toward his father.

Turtle Soup

MARILYN CHIN

Marilyn Chin (b. 1955) is a prominent Chinese American poet, writer, and translator who grew up in Portland, Oregon, after her family emigrated from Hong Kong. She earned a BA from the University of Massachusetts and an MFA from the University of Iowa. Chin has won numerous awards for her poetry, including the Radcliffe Institute Fellowship at Harvard, two National Endowment for the Arts grants, the Stegner Fellowship, five Pushcart Prizes, and a Fulbright Fellowship to study in Taiwan. Chin is the author of four books of poetry: *Dwarf Bamboo* (1987), *The Phoenix Gone, the Terrace Empty* (1994), *Rhapsody in Plain Yellow* (2002), and *Hard Love Province* (2014). She has also published one book of interlinked stories, *Revenge of the Mooncake Vixen* (2009), and has translated works by early modern Chinese poet Ai Qing and the early modern Japanese poet Gōzō Yoshimasu. Chin's own work explores Asian American feminism and bicultural identity. In "Turtle Soup," Chin presents a dinner scene that captures a moment of conflict between two cultures and two generations.

You go home one evening tired from work,
and your mother boils you turtle soup.
Twelve hours hunched over the hearth
(who knows what else is in that cauldron).

You say, "Ma, you've poached the symbol of long life;
that turtle lived four thousand years, swam
the Wei, up the Yellow, over the Yangtze.[1]
Witnessed the Bronze Age,[2] the High Tang[3]
grazed on splendid sericulture."[4]
(So, she boils the life out of him.)

"All our ancestors have been fools.
Remember Uncle Wu who rode ten thousand miles
to kill a famous Manchu[5] and ended up
with his head on a pole? Eat, child,
its liver will make you strong."

"Sometimes you're the life, sometimes the sacrifice."
Her sobbing is inconsolable.
So, you spread that gentle napkin
over your lap in decorous Pasadena.

[1] Rivers that are a part of the Grand Canal in China. — EDS.
[2] 3000 BC – 1000 BC. — EDS.
[3] Period of time during the Tang Dynasty when Chinese poetry flourished. — EDS.
[4] Raising silkworms in order to produce silk. — EDS.
[5] A Chinese ethnic minority. — EDS.

Baby, some high priestess has got it wrong.
The golden decal on the green underbelly
says "Made in Hong Kong."

Is there nothing left but the shell
and humanity's strange inscriptions,
the songs, the rites, the oracles?

for Ben Huang

[1993]

EXPLORING THE TEXT

1. Who is the speaker of "Turtle Soup"? Who is the audience — the "you" the poem addresses? How does Marilyn Chin's use of the pronoun "you" complicate the character of the speaker?
2. Consider Chin's diction choices. What effect do words and phrases such as "cauldron," "symbol," "sacrifice," "high priestess," "inscriptions," "rites," and "oracles" have on the mood of the poem?
3. What do the references to Chinese history, art, culture, and geography in the second stanza tell us about the speaker? What does her mother's response — "All our ancestors have been fools" — suggest about the relationship between the speaker and her mother? about the mother's attitude toward the history and traditions the speaker cites?
4. What is the effect of the parentheses in the last lines of the first and second stanzas? Why do you think the poet chose to use them?
5. What do you make of the "Made in Hong Kong" decal in line 22? What does it suggest about the speaker's opinion of authenticity? What might her mother think of it?
6. What do you think "'Sometimes you're the life, sometimes the sacrifice'" (l. 16) means? Why does that statement cause the speaker to "spread that gentle napkin / over [her] lap in decorous Pasadena" (ll. 18–19)?
7. What role does food — the turtle soup — and the idea of nourishment play in the poem? How does the poet move from the scene of her mother cooking a meal to commenting on "humanity's strange inscriptions / the songs, the rites, the oracles?" (ll. 24–25)?

Peaches

ADRIENNE SU

Adrienne Su (b. 1967) is an American poet from Atlanta, Georgia. She earned a BA from Harvard University and an MFA from the University of Virginia. Su's first book, *Middle Kingdom* (1997), was translated into Chinese and published in China in 2006. She is the author of two other poetry collections: *Sanctuary* (2006) and *Having None of It* (2009). Su's writing has earned many awards, including a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship and residences at the Fine Arts Works Center and The Frost Place. Her poems have been anthologized in *The New American Poets* (2000), *The Pushcart Prize XXIV* (2000), and *Asian-American Poetry: The Next Generation* (2004). She currently teaches at Dickinson College. In "Peaches," Su reflects on her heritage as a child of Chinese immigrants growing up in the American South.

A crate of peaches straight from the farm
has to be maintained, or eaten in days.
Obvious, but in my family, they went so fast,
I never saw the mess that punishes delay.

I thought everyone bought fruit by the crate,
stored it in the coolest part of the house,
then devoured it before any could rot.
I'm from the Peach State, and to those

who ask *But where are you from originally*,
I'd like to reply *The homeland of the peach*,
but I'm too nice, and they might not look it up.
In truth, the reason we bought so much

did have to do with being Chinese — at least
Chinese in that part of America, both strangers
and natives on a lonely, beautiful street
where food came in stackable containers

and fussy bags, unless you bothered to drive
to the source, where the same money landed
a bushel of fruit, a twenty-pound sack of rice.
You had to drive anyway, each house surrounded

by land enough to grow your own, if lawns
hadn't been required. At home I loved to stare
into the extra freezer, reviewing mountains
of foil-wrapped meats, cakes, juice concentrate,

mysterious packets brought by house guests
from New York Chinatown, to be transformed
by heat, force, and my mother's patient effort,
enough to keep us fed through flood or storm,

provided the power stayed on, or fire and ice
could be procured, which would be labor-intensive,
but so was everything else my parents did.
Their lives were labor, they kept this from the kids,

who grew up to confuse work with pleasure,
to become typical immigrants' children,
taller than their parents and unaware of hunger
except when asked the odd, perplexing question.

[2015]

EXPLORING THE TEXT

1. What do you think the speaker means when she says that the peaches "went so fast / I never saw the mess that punishes the delay" (ll. 3–4)? How does that line comment on more than just a crate of peaches?
2. The speaker says she comes from the Peach State, which is Georgia. Why is she asked where she originally comes from? How does the family's way of buying peaches by the crate complicate her answer to that question?
3. Consider the poem's syntax. What effect does Adrienne Su's use of enjambment have on the poem's tone? Why might she have placed stanza breaks mid-sentence?
4. What do you think the "odd, perplexing question" in the poem's last line is?
5. How does this poem comment on contemporary American life? What contrasts does the speaker make with the life of her parents as immigrants from China?
6. In an essay about food in poetry, Su writes:

   > Food has been a topic of poetry for many centuries and in many cultures; the notion that food writing and poetry writing are totally separate ventures is a recent development. Much of our knowledge of eating habits, culinary practices, and food taboos throughout history and around the world comes from poetry. Food in poetry also functions as a powerful symbol of spiritual and moral states. . . .

   How does the food in "Peaches" provide information about eating habits, culinary practices, and food taboos? Does it function as a "symbol of spritual or moral states"? Explain your answer.

FOCUS ON COMPARISON AND CONTRAST

1. Compare the tone of "Turtle Soup" to that of "Peaches." Are there any similarities?
2. Both poems address themes of family, cultural tradition, and Chinese American experience through food. What are the similarities in how the poets choose to address those themes? What are the differences?
3. While the narrative of "Turtle Soup" centers on a mother-daughter relationship, "Peaches" focuses primarily on the speaker's memories of growing up in Georgia. However, both poems illuminate a gap between the speaker's generation and that of her parents. Compare and contrast the speaker in each poem. How are their attitudes toward their parents' generation similar? How are they different?

WRITING ASSIGNMENT

"Turtle Soup" and "Peaches" both examine intergenerational family relationships through the lens of food. Compare and contrast the two poems, analyzing the techniques each poet uses to convey the nature of the speaker's relationship with her family.

CONNOTATION

"Diversity Blooms in Outer Suburbs." This headline from the *Washington Post* captures the power of connotation. The article uses the words "grows" and "increases" throughout, yet "Blooms" in the headline connotes more than growth: it's positive growth, a flowering. Just as journalists use the power of connotative meaning to draw in readers, writers of literary texts — poems, plays, stories, and novels — make language choices that influence their readers' responses. What is the difference, for instance, between *labor* and *work*? between *lady* and *woman*? between *pail* and *bucket*? You can be sure that writers think about these differences and make deliberate choices.

Paying attention to connotation often leads to an interpretation, or a better understanding of the mood of a piece — especially when it comes to verb choices. Consider the following sentences from the "Play" opening of *Fences* (p. 152):

> **THE PLAY** Near the turn of the century, the destitute of Europe *sprang* on the city with tenacious claws and an honest and solid dream. The city *devoured* them.

If Wilson had used words that were less evocative, the sentence would be far less vivid. For instance:

> Near the turn of the century, the destitute of Europe *arrived* in the city with *ambition* and an honest and solid dream. The city *absorbed* them.

"Sprang" suggests a feeling that "arrived" does not; "tenacious claws" carries a visual image that the less expressive "ambition" does not; and certainly "devoured" evokes an exciting and almost aggressive quality that the more neutral "absorbed" does not.

Connotation may work individually or cumulatively. Notice in the following paragraph from the "Play" section of the opening of *Fences* how the connotations of several words together suggest upheaval and progress:

> By 1957, the hard-won victories of the European immigrants had solidified the industrial might of America. War had been confronted and won with new energies that used loyalty and patriotism as its fuel. Life was rich, full, and flourishing. The Milwaukee Braves won the World Series, and the hot winds of change that would make the sixties a turbulent, racing, dangerous, and provocative decade had not yet begun to blow full.

Notice how a few word substitutions can change the mood of the paragraph:

> By 1957, the hard-won victories of the European immigrants had *built up* the industrial *strength* of America. War had been *fought* and won with new energies that used loyalty and patriotism as its fuel. Life was rich, full, and *improving*. The Milwaukee Braves won the World Series, and the *growing* change that would make the sixties an *unstable, exciting,* dangerous, and *controversial* decade had not yet begun to *happen*.

The following exercises will help you examine how precisely chosen words can convey meaning.

EXERCISE 1

Discuss the differences in connotations in the following groups of words:

a. skinny, slender, svelte, gaunt, slim, lithe

b. dog, pooch, canine, pup

c. run, bolt, race, sprint, dash

d. alleged, reported, maintained, contended, claimed

e. rich, affluent, prosperous, wealthy

f. kids, descendants, children, progeny, offspring

EXERCISE 2

A. What do the connotations of the underlined words and phrases suggest about the home life that the speaker describes in Robert Hayden's "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
> banked fires blaze. No one ever thanked him.
>
> I'd wake and hear the cold splintering, breaking.
> When the rooms were warm, he'd call,
> and slowly I would rise and dress,
> fearing the chronic angers of that house,
>
> Speaking indifferently to him,
> who had driven out the cold
> and polished my good shoes as well.
> What did I know, what did I know
> of love's austere and lonely offices?

B. What connotations contribute to the ambivalence the narrator of Alice Munro's "The Progress of Love" feels about her Aunt Beryl?

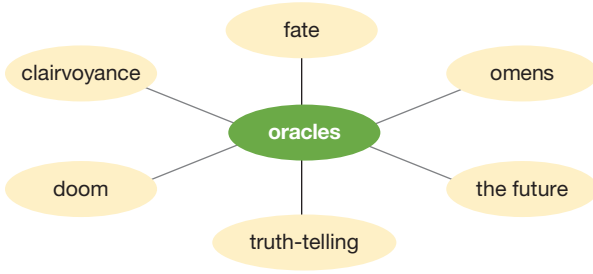
> A scarecrow in white slacks (this is what my father called her afterward), with a white sun hat tied under her chin by a flaunting red ribbon. Her fingernails and toenails — she wore sandals — were painted to match the ribbon. She wore the small, dark sunglasses people wore at that time. (Not the people I knew — they didn't own sunglasses.) She had a big red mouth, a loud laugh, hair of an unnatural color and a high gloss, like cherry wood. She was so noisy and shiny, so glamorously got up, that it was hard to tell whether she was good looking, or happy, or anything.

EXERCISE 3

Examine the following words from Marilyn Chin's poem "Turtle Soup." What connotations do these words suggest to you? Write each word on a piece of paper and cluster any associations that come to you, using the model cluster below as a template.

- boiled
- poached
- cauldron
- underbelly
- rites

MODEL CLUSTER



How do the connotations of these words contribute to the poem's tone? What inferences can you draw regarding the meaning of the poem based on Chin's choice of words? Turn to a partner and share your findings.

EXERCISE 4

Reread Mary Oliver's poem "Wild Geese." How do the connotations of words in that poem contribute to its meaning? For instance, the word *animal* can often have negative connotations, but how is it used in line 4? Find other words with denotations and connotations that are important to the meaning of "Wild Geese."

EXERCISE 5

Write two short paragraphs. In the first, describe something about your family or home that you like or appreciate. In the second, describe something about your family or home that you find annoying. In both paragraphs, choose words with connotations that convey your attitude toward your subjects.

HOME AND FAMILY

1. Select three texts from this chapter that you found particularly memorable, and in a well-organized essay, analyze how the writers have explored the theme of home and family.
2. Compare and contrast how two of the poets in this chapter have used resources of language such as diction, syntax, and imagery to express their ideas regarding the theme of home and family.
3. Several of the works in this chapter (including *Fences*, "The Moths," "The Progress of Love," "The Hammock," and "Peaches") explore multigenerational family units. Using two or three different selections, discuss the ties that keep families together as well as those that challenge the connections among multiple generations.
4. Select a text from the chapter that depicts a conflict between a parent and a child. Craft an essay in which you analyze the source of the conflict, and explore how this tension contributes to the meaning of the work as a whole.
5. Selecting three or four texts from the chapter, write an essay arguing whether families are more alike or different regardless of specific culture, ethnic background, or time period.
6. Choose one of the following quotations, and explain why it fits your beliefs about family in general or your family in particular.
   a. "Nobody has ever before asked the nuclear family to live all by itself in a box the way we do. With no relatives, no support, we've put it in an impossible situation."

      — Margaret Mead

   b. "If the family were a fruit, it would be an orange, a circle of sections, held together but separable — each segment distinct."

      — Letty Cottin Pogrebin

   c. "Important families are like potatoes. The best parts are underground."

      — Francis Bacon
7. Choose one of the poems addressed (directly or indirectly) to an absent party (for instance, the poems by Anne Bradstreet, William Butler Yeats, Langston Hughes, or Robert Hayden), and respond by writing a poem in the absent person's voice.
8. Search a museum website for images of home and family. Find a painting or photograph that conveys an image of family in marked contrast to that depicted by any text in this chapter. Explain the two perspectives of family.
9. Select a character from one of the texts in this chapter and a problem or difficulty from another text. In the voice of the character you've chosen, offer advice on how to solve or address the problem.
10. Write an essay in which you compare and contrast the dinner scene in "The Progress of Love" with a dinner scene in another work, such as F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, or Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations*.