

Humanities Montana's Pulitzer Poetry Project:

A selection of poems by Pulitzer Prize Poets
and accompanying discussion guides.

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Pulitzer Poetry Discussions: Tips for Facilitators

1. These discussions employ poems by Pulitzer Prize Poets to generate reflection and conversation. Facilitators should resist lecturing. Rather, the facilitator's job is to ask questions which stimulate audience participation.
2. The selected poems serve as "text" for the discussion. Each of these poems raises difficult and meaningful questions about complex topics. A set of suggested questions accompany each poem. Use these questions (or similar open-ended questions) to steer the audience toward the poem's central themes and concerns. As the conversation progresses, allow the group to shift focus away from the poem itself and toward an exploration of the poem's central themes and concerns.
3. Choose a quiet, comfortable venue. To encourage optimum participation, seat participants in a circle so that everyone may speak face to face. Group size should be no smaller than six participants and no larger than 30. Name tags, snacks, and beverages help the participants feel welcome and at ease.
4. Introduce yourself. Tell the participants: "We have gathered to have a thoughtful conversation. We will read a poem and talk about ideas. Please help the conversation flow. Listen respectfully while others speak. Join in with your own thoughts, too. Our conversation is not concerned with right and wrong answers. Our collective job is to explore the complexities of topics at hand. The poem will be the first topic at hand, but we'll let the ideas in the poem lead us think and question and share."
5. Ground rules: — Talky people try to share. Quiet people try to participate.
— Not a debate, but a chance to understand differing viewpoints.
6. Opening exercise: Question to ponder. Choose a question which will begin steering the group toward ideas and themes relevant to the poem. Allow sixty seconds of silent reflection. Then direct participants to discuss their thoughts with a neighbor (or small groups of three or four) for five minutes.
7. Handout reading. Ask for reader. Read once. Read again.
8. Opening question — text based. Ask something specific. Be patient. Allow silence.
9. Move the discussion from the text to more general issues and ideas.
10. End on a high point. Optimum length of the conversation is 45 to 60 minutes.
12. Closing exercise. Allow 60 seconds of silence to allow participants to reflect on the conversation. Ask: "What one thought from our conversation will you take home?" Time permitting, do a "go-round" and let everyone in the circle share. Or, ask for six or eight volunteer responses.

I. Theme -- War and Peace

("You cannot shake hands with a clenched fist." – Mahatma Gandhi)

Poems for discussion:

- "The Unknown Citizen" by W.H. Auden
- "Anger" by C.K. Williams
- "Kindness" by Stephen Dunn

II. Theme -- Civil Rights and Equality

("Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere." – Martin Luther King, Jr.)

Poems for discussion:

- "Enlightenment" by Natasha Trethewey
- "Lovers of the Poor" by Gwendolyn Brooks
- "The Sweetness of Bobby Hefka" by Philip Levine
paired with "Racists" by C.K. Williams

III. Theme – Power: Accountability and Abuse

("Nearly all men can stand adversity, but if you want to test a man's character, give him power." — Abraham Lincoln)

Poems for discussion:

- "The Victims" by Sharon Olds
paired with "Rage" by Mary Oliver
- "Souls" by C.K. Williams
paired with "Chaos" by C.K. Williams
- "Teacher Answering Young Radicals" by Stephen Dunn
paired with "Fable of the Water Merchant" by Stephen Dunn

IV. Theme – Quarrels with Ourselves

("We make out of the quarrel with others, rhetoric, but of the quarrel with ourselves, poetry." – Yeats)

Poems for discussion:

- "The Layers" by Stanley Kunitz
- "Don't Do That" by Stephen Dunn
- "Fish" by C.K. Williams

V. Theme – Us and Them

(“Today, as the world becomes smaller and smaller, the concept of “us” and “them” is almost outdated.” -- The Dalai Lama)

Poems for discussion:

“On the Death of a Colleague” by Stephen Dunn

“To a Terrorist” by Stephen Dunn

“Mending Wall” by Robert Frost

VI. Theme – Us and Nature

(“May your trails be crooked, winding, lonesome, dangerous, leading to the most amazing view.” -- Edward Abbey)

Poems for discussion:

--“The Black Snake” by Mary Oliver

paired with “The Summer Day” by Mary Oliver

--“Lying in a Hammock on William Duffy’s Farm” by James Wright

paired with “By Frasier Creek Falls” by Gary Snyder

--“Crossing a City Highway” by Jusef Komunyakaa

paired with “To Christ Our Lord” by Galway Kinnell

VII. Theme – What is “Work”?

(“Nothing will work unless you do.” – Maya Angelou)

Poems for discussion:

--“Woodpile” by Robert Frost

paired with “Mowing” by Robert Frost

--“What Work Is” by Philip Levine

paired with “Myrtle” by Ted Kooser

--“The Good Life” by Tracy Smith

paired with “My Brother’s Work” by Stephen Dunn

The Unknown Citizen

-- W. H. Auden

(To JS/07 M 378

This Marble Monument

Is Erected by the State)

He was found by the Bureau of Statistics to be
One against whom there was no official complaint,
And all the reports on his conduct agree
That, in the modern sense of an old-fashioned word, he was a saint,
For in everything he did he served the Greater Community.
Except for the War till the day he retired
He worked in a factory and never got fired,
But satisfied his employers, Fudge Motors Inc.
Yet he wasn't a scab or odd in his views,
For his Union reports that he paid his dues,
(Our report on his Union shows it was sound)
And our Social Psychology workers found
That he was popular with his mates and liked a drink.
The Press are convinced that he bought a paper every day
And that his reactions to advertisements were normal in every way.
Policies taken out in his name prove that he was fully insured,
And his Health-card shows he was once in hospital but left it cured.
Both Producers Research and High-Grade Living declare
He was fully sensible to the advantages of the Instalment Plan
And had everything necessary to the Modern Man,
A phonograph, a radio, a car and a frigidaire.
Our researchers into Public Opinion are content
That he held the proper opinions for the time of year;
When there was peace, he was for peace: when there was war, he went.
He was married and added five children to the population,
Which our Eugenist says was the right number for a parent of his generation.
And our teachers report that he never interfered with their education.
Was he free? Was he happy? The question is absurd:
Had anything been wrong, we should certainly have heard.

Opening exercise: Think of a moment in your experience when you felt especially happy and free. Why was this moment more memorable than others? In what ways were conditions right for this experience to happen?

Suggested questions for discussion:

1. Who is speaking in this poem? What are the speaker's main concerns?
 2. What's the significance of the title? Why is the "unknown" citizen unknown?
 3. What are the implications of describing the unknown citizen as "one against whom there was no official complaint"?
 4. "Was he free? Was he happy?" Why does the speaker feel these questions are absurd?
 5. What might the unknown citizen have to say if he could have a say?
 6. Does freedom of opinion imply freedom of speech? What are the limits of free speech?
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Anger

-- C. K. Williams

I killed the bee for no reason except that it was there and you were
watching, disapproving,
which made what I would do much worse but I was angry with
you anyway and so I put my foot on it,
leaned on it, tested how much I'd need to make that resilient,
resisting cartridge give way
and *crack!* abruptly, shockingly it did give way and you turned
sharply and sharply now
I felt myself balanced in your eyes—why should I feel myself so
balanced always in your eyes;
isn't just this half the reason for my rage, these tendencies of
yours, susceptibilities of mine?—
and "Why?" your eyes said, "Why?" and even as mine sent back my
answer, "None of your affair,"
I knew that I was being once again, twice now, weighed, and this
time anyway found wanting.

Opening exercise: In your experience, have you witnessed someone do something cruel or destructive simply for spite? What was your reaction?

Suggested questions for discussion:

1. What is the relationship between the speaker and the other person in the poem?
2. Why does the speaker kill the bee?
3. What difference, if any, would it have made if no one were watching?
4. What does the speaker mean when he says, "I felt myself balanced in your eyes"?
5. Is the killing of the bee, "None of your affair"?
6. How is the speaker being "weighed"? Why does he say he's "found wanting"?

Kindness

-- Stephen Dunn

In Manhattan, I learned a public kindness
was a triumph
over the push of money, the constrictions

of fear. If it occurred it came
from some deep
primal memory, almost entirely lost—

Here, let me help you, then you me,
otherwise we'll die.
Which is why I love the weather

in Minnesota, every winter kindness
linked
to obvious self-interest,

thus so many kindnesses
when you need them;
praise blizzards, praise the cold.

Kindness of any kind shames me,
makes me remember
what I haven't done or been.

I met a woman this summer in Aspen
so kind
I kept testing her to see

where it would end. I thought: how easy
to be kind in Aspen,
no poverty or crime, each day

a cruise in the blond, expressive streets.
But I was proof
it wasn't easy, there was an end

to her kindness and I found it.
I kept wanting
what she didn't have

until she gave me what I deserved.
If the hearts of men
are merciless, as James Wright said,

then any kindness is water turned
to wine, it's manna
in the new and populous desert.

The stranger in me knows
what strangers need.
It might be better to turn us away.

Opening exercise: Think of a moment in your experience when you witnessed a surprising act of kindness. Why were you surprised?

Suggested questions for discussion:

1. What's the difference, if any, between a private kindness and a public kindness?
2. The speaker talks about three situations involving kindness: Manhattan, Minnesota, and Aspen. How do the locations affect the likeliness of kindness?
3. Do you agree or disagree with the speaker when he claims that kindness comes from "some deep primal memory?"
4. Why does the speaker say, "kindness of any kind shames me"? What are other possible reactions the speaker might have in witnessing kindness?
5. Why does the speaker test the woman in Aspen to discover her limits of kindness? What are the limits of kindness?

6. What possible meanings does the last stanza have? What does the speaker mean by “the stranger in me”? What does the speaker know about “what strangers need”? Why does the speaker say it might be better to turn a stranger like himself away?

Enlightenment

-- Natasha Trethewey

In the portrait of Jefferson that hangs
at Monticello, he is rendered two-toned:
his forehead white with illumination —

a lit bulb — the rest of his face in shadow,
darkened as if the artist meant to contrast
his bright knowledge, its dark subtext.

By 1805, when Jefferson sat for the portrait,
he was already linked to an affair
with his slave. Against a backdrop, blue

and ethereal, a wash of paint that seems
to hold him in relief, Jefferson gazes out
across the centuries, his lips fixed as if

he's just uttered some final word.

The first time I saw the painting, I listened
as my father explained the contradictions:

how Jefferson hated slavery, though — *out*
of necessity, my father said — had to own
slaves; that his moral philosophy meant

he could not have fathered those children:
would have been impossible, my father said.
For years we debated the distance between

word and deed. I'd follow my father from book
to book, gathering citations, listening
as he named — like a field guide to Virginia —

each flower and tree and bird as if to prove
a man's pursuit of knowledge is greater
than his shortcomings, the limits of his vision.

I did not know then the subtext
of our story, that my father could imagine
Jefferson's words made flesh in my flesh —

the improvement of the blacks in body
and mind, in the first instance of their mixture
with the whites — or that my father could believe

he'd made me *better*. When I think of this now,

I see how the past holds us captive,
its beautiful ruin etched on the mind's eye:

my young father, a rough outline of the old man

he's become, needing to show me
the better measure of his heart, an equation

writ large at Monticello. That was years ago.

Now, we take in how much has changed:
talk of Sally Hemings, someone asking,

How white was she? — parsing the fractions

as if to name what made her worthy
of Jefferson's attentions: a near-white,

quadroon mistress, not a plain black slave.

Imagine stepping back into the past,
our guide tells us then — and I can't resist

whispering to my father: *This is where*

we split up. I'll head around to the back.
When he laughs, I know he's grateful

I've made a joke of it, this history

that links us — white father, black daughter —
even as it renders us other to each other.

Opening exercise: Think about a moment in your experience when others made assumptions about you because of your appearance. What assumptions were they making? Were these assumptions in any way justifiable? Why or why not?

Suggested questions for discussion:

1. The speaker of the poem claims there are “contradictions” in the character and actions of Thomas Jefferson. What are they?
2. How does the father in the poem explain Jefferson’s contradictions?
3. Does the speaker of the poem accept her father’s view of Jefferson? If not, why not?
4. Why did the poet title the poem “Enlightenment”?
5. To what extent is race a matter of skin color? What might be other factors by which a person identifies him or herself as one race or another?
6. What brings the father and daughter in the poem together. What separates them? How does race affect their relationship?

The Lovers of the Poor

-- Gwendolyn Brooks

arrive. The Ladies from the Ladies' Betterment League
Arrive in the afternoon, the late light slanting
In diluted gold bars across the boulevard brag
Of proud, seamed faces with mercy and murder hinting
Here, there, interrupting, all deep and debonair,
The pink paint on the innocence of fear;
Walk in a gingerly manner up the hall.
Cutting with knives served by their softest care,
Served by their love, so barbarously fair.
Whose mothers taught: You'd better not be cruel!
You had better not throw stones upon the wrens!
Herein they kiss and coddle and assault
Anew and dearly in the innocence
With which they baffle nature. Who are full,
Sleek, tender-clad, fit, fiftyish, a-glow, all
Sweetly abortive, hinting at fat fruit,
Judge it high time that fiftyish fingers felt
Beneath the lovelier planes of enterprise.
To resurrect. To moisten with milky chill.
To be a random hitching-post or plush.
To be, for wet eyes, random and handy hem.

 Their guild is giving money to the poor.

The worthy poor. The very very worthy
And beautiful poor. Perhaps just not too swarthy?
perhaps just not too dirty nor too dim
Nor—passionate. In truth, what they could wish
Is—something less than derelict or dull.
Not staunch enough to stab, though, gaze for gaze!
God shield them sharply from the beggar-bold!
The noxious needy ones whose battle's bald
Nonetheless for being voiceless, hits one down.

 But it's all so bad! and entirely too much for them.

The stench; the urine, cabbage, and dead beans,
Dead porridges of assorted dusty grains,
The old smoke, *heavy* diapers, and, they're told,
Something called chitterlings. The darkness. Drawn
Darkness, or dirty light. The soil that stirs.
The soil that looks the soil of centuries.
And for that matter the *general* oldness. Old
Wood. Old marble. Old tile. Old old old.
Not homekind Oldness! Not Lake Forest, Glencoe.
Nothing is sturdy, nothing is majestic,
There is no quiet drama, no rubbed glaze, no
Unkillable infirmity of such
A tasteful turn as lately they have left,
Glencoe, Lake Forest, and to which their cars
Must presently restore them. When they're done
With dullards and distortions of this fistic

Patience of the poor and put-upon.

They've never seen such a make-do-ness as
Newspaper rugs before! In this, this "flat,"
Their hostess is gathering up the oozed, the rich
Rugs of the morning (tattered! the bespattered. . . .)
Readies to spread clean rugs for afternoon.
Here is a scene for you. The Ladies look,
In horror, behind a substantial citizeness
Whose trains clank out across her swollen heart.
Who, arms akimbo, almost fills a door.
All tumbling children, quilts dragged to the floor
And tortured thereover, potato peelings, soft-
Eyed kitten, hunched-up, haggard, to-be-hurt.

Their League is allotting largesse to the Lost.
But to put their clean, their pretty money, to put
Their money collected from delicate rose-fingers
Tipped with their hundred flawless rose-nails seems . . .

They own Spode, Lowestoft, candelabra,
Mantels, and hostess gowns, and sunburst clocks,
Turtle soup, Chippendale, red satin "hangings,"
Aubussons and Hattie Carnegie. They Winter
In Palm Beach; cross the Water in June; attend,
When suitable, the nice Art Institute;
Buy the right books in the best bindings; saunter
On Michigan, Easter mornings, in sun or wind.
Oh Squalor! This sick four-story hulk, this fibre
With fissures everywhere! Why, what are bringings
Of loathe-love largesse? What shall peril hungers
So old old, what shall flatter the desolate?
Tin can, blocked fire escape and chitterling
And swaggering seeking youth and the puzzled wreckage
Of the middle passage, and urine and stale shames
And, again, the porridges of the underslung
And children children children. Heavens! That
Was a rat, surely, off there, in the shadows? Long
And long-tailed? Gray? The Ladies from the Ladies'
Betterment League agree it will be better
To achieve the outer air that rights and steadies,
To hie to a house that does not holler, to ring
Bells elsetime, better presently to cater
To no more Possibilities, to get
Away. Perhaps the money can be posted.
Perhaps they too may choose another Slum!
Some serious sooty half-unhappy home!—
Where loathe-love likelier may be invested.

Keeping their scented bodies in the center
Of the hall as they walk down the hysterical hall,
They allow their lovely skirts to graze no wall,
Are off at what they manage of a canter,
And, resuming all the clues of what they were,
Try to avoid inhaling the laden air.

Opening exercise: Think of a moment in your experience when you offered help (or witnessed others offering help), and the efforts to help seemed to go awry. What went wrong? OR, think of a moment in your experience when you offered help (or witnessed others offering help), and the efforts seemed successful. What went right?

Suggested questions for discussion:

1. How does the speaker of the poem characterize the ladies of The Ladies' Betterment League? Are these characterizations justifiable? Why or why not?
2. What are the ladies' intentions?
3. What assumptions are the ladies making about themselves? What assumptions are they making about others?
4. Who are the "worthy poor"? Are some people more worthy of help than others?
5. What are the possible meanings of "loathe-love"?
6. What elements constitute a successful effort to help others? What factors indicate failure?

The Sweetness of Bobby Hefka

-- Philip Levine

What do you make of little Bobby Hefka
in the 11th grade admitting to Mr. Jaslow
that he was a racist and if Mr. Jaslow
was so tolerant how come he couldn't
tolerate Bobby? The class was stunned.
"How do you feel about the Jews?"
asked my brother Eddie, menacingly.
"Oh, come on, Eddie," Bobby said,
"I thought we were friends." Mr. Jaslow
banged the desk to regain control.
"What is it about Negroes you do not like?"
he asked in his most rational voice,
which always failed to hide the fact
he was crazy as a bed bug, claiming
Capek's *RUR* was far greater than *Macbeth*.
Bobby was silent for a long minute, thinking.
"Negroes frighten me," he finally said,
"they frighten my mother and father who never
saw them in Finland, they scare my brother
who's much bigger than me." Then he added
the one name, Joe Louis, who had been
busy cutting down black and white men
no matter what their size. Mr. Jaslow
sighed with compassion. We knew that
before the class ended he'd be telling us
a great era for men and women was imminent
if only we could cross the threshold
into humanitarianism, into the ideals
of G. B. Shaw, Karel Capek, and Mr. Jaslow.
I looked across the room to where Bobby

sat in the back row next to the windows.
He was still awake, his blue eyes wide.
Beyond him the dark clouds of 1945
were clustering over Linwood, the smokestack
of the power plant gave its worst
to a low sky. Lacking the patience to wait
for combat, Johnny Mooradian had quit school
a year before, and Johnny was dead on an atoll
without a name. Bobby Hefka had told the truth
--to his own shame and pride--and the rains
came on. Nothing had changed for a roomful
of 17 year olds more scared of life than death.
The last time I saw Bobby Hefka he was driving
a milk truck for Dairy Cream, he was married,
he had a little girl, he still dreamed
of going to medical school. He listened
in sorrow to what had become of me. He handed
me an icy quart bottle of milk, a gift
we both held on to for a silent moment
while the great city roared around us, the trucks
honking and racing their engines to make him move.
His eyes were wide open. Bobby Hefka loved me.

Racists

-- C.K. Williams

Vas un Afique! Back to Africa! the butcher we used to patronize in the
Rue Cadet Market,
beside himself, shrieked at a black man in an argument the rest of the
import of which I missed
but that made me anyway for three years walk an extra street to a shop
of definitely lower quality
until I convinced myself that probably I'd misunderstood that other thing
and could come back.
Today another black man stopped, asking something that again I didn't
catch, and the butcher,
who at the moment was unloading his rotisserie, slipping the chickens
off their heavy spit,
as he answered – how get this right? – casually but *brandished*
the still-hot metal,
so the other, whatever he was there for, had to subtly lean away a little,
so as not to flinch.

Opening exercise: If humanity were all one race, one color . . . what (if anything) would change? Try to be specific, concrete. Give examples.

Suggested questions for discussion:

1. In “The Sweetness of Bobby Hefka,” the speaker of the poem asks: “What do you make of little Bobby Hefka in the 11th grade admitting to Mr. Jaslow that he was a racist and if Mr. Jaslow was so tolerant how come he couldn't tolerate Bobby?” Is Mr. Jaslow’s reaction to Bobby fair or unfair? Is the speaker’s question fair or unfair?
2. Is Bobby Hefka a racist? Is the butcher a racist? How does the label apply (or not) to either or both of these characters?
3. The speaker in “The Sweetness of Bobby Hefka” is Jewish. Yet, he claims that “Bobby Hefka loved me.” Is it possible to have prejudices against a group of people and yet love an individual in that group? Why or why not?
4. Is the poem’s attitude toward the butcher similar or dissimilar to the poem’s attitude toward Bobby Hefka? What significant details are given to portray each of these characters?
5. To what extent is it true that “action speaks louder than words”? When, if ever, might it not be true?
6. What are the possible roots of racism? What are possible cures?

The Victims

-- Sharon Olds

When Mother divorced you, we were glad. She took it and
took it in silence, all those years and then
kicked you out, suddenly, and her
kids loved it. Then you were fired, and we
grinned inside, the way people grinned when
Nixon's helicopter lifted off the South
Lawn for the last time. We were tickled
to think of your office taken away,
your secretaries taken away,
your lunches with three double bourbons,
your pencils, your reams of paper. Would they take your
suits back, too, those dark
carcasses hung in your closet, and the black
noses of your shoes with their large pores?
She had taught us to take it, to hate you and take it
until we pricked with her for your
annihilation, Father. Now I
pass the bums in doorways, the white
slugs of their bodies gleaming through slits in their
suits of compressed silt, the stained
flippers of their hands, the underwater
fire of their eyes, ships gone down with the
lanterns lit, and I wonder who took it and
took it from them in silence until they had
given it all away and had nothing
left but this.

Rage

-- Mary Oliver

You are the dark song
of the morning;
serious and slow,
you shave, you dress,
you descend the stairs
in your public clothes
and drive away, you become
the wise and powerful one
who makes all the days
possible in the world.
But you were also the red song
in the night,
stumbling through the house
to the child's bed,
to the damp rose of her body,
leaving your bitter taste.
And forever those nights snarl
the delicate machinery of the days.
When the child's mother smiles
you see on her cheekbones
a truth you will never confess;
and you see how the child grows—
timidly, crouching in corners.
Sometimes in the wide night
you hear the most mournful cry,
a ravished and terrible moment.
In your dreams she's a tree
that will never come to leaf—
in your dreams she's a watch
you dropped on the dark stones
till no one could gather the fragments—
in your dreams you have sullied and murdered,
and dreams do not lie.

Opening exercise: Think of a moment in your own experience when you were in charge of other people, when you held authority. By what factors was your authority limited? In what manner (if at all) were you accountable?

Suggested questions for discussion:

1. Compare and contrast the tone of both poems. Does the tone in each of these poems reach beyond rage? What feelings (if any) might accompany rage?
2. In the poem "The Victims," is it justifiable that the speaker of the poem feels glad and grins at the victimizer's eventual demise and suffering?
3. In the poem "The Victims," what possible meanings might be inferred from the closing idea that the victimizer had "given it all away"?

4. In the poem "Rage," the victimizer is described as having a public self and a private self. To what measure does everyone have a public self and a private self?
 5. What role does silence play in both poems?
 6. What constitutes the "abuse" of power? What measures does society take to prevent abuse?
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Souls

-- C.K. Williams

Bound with baling wire to the tubular jerry-built bumper of a beat-up
old dump truck
are two of those gigantic teddy bears people win (usually shells) in cheap
amusement parks.
It's pouring: dressed in real children's clothes, they are, out mothers
would have said, drenched,
and they're also unrelentingly filthy, matted with the sticky, sickly,
ghastly, dark gray sheen
you see on bums ambulating between drinking streets and on mongrels
guarding junkyards.
Their stuffing hasn't been so crushed in them as to affect their jaunty,
open-armed availability,
but, regarded more closely, they seem to manifest a fanatical expression-
lessness, like soldiers,
who, wounded, captured, waiting to be shipped away or shot, must
submit now to their photograph.

Chaos

-- C.K. Williams

I saw a spider on a library cornice snatch a plump,
brightly lacquered as-a-yellow-pepper beetle
and dash – that was the word – across its system of webs
until it came to a dark lair where it let itself fall,
settle, and avidly, methodically, with evident delectation,
devour its still so sadly brilliant hued prey.

All this took place in a dream, but even when I woke,
my revulsion wouldn't abate, nor my dread,
because when I followed the associative tracks
that had brought me to engender such harshness in myself,
I kept being driven further than I wanted to go,
arriving at conclusions I'd never usually entertain.

The beetle, I thought, was the generalized human person,
gullible, malleable, impotent, self-destructive –
gullible, above all, is what kept coming to me;
how the prospect of living without anxiety renders us
ever more anxious, more ready to accede
to interests which clearly contradict ours.

The spider was power, plus limitless greed,
plus abstraction, not God, but something like God,
which perpetrates something like Babel on us,
within us, though, in our genes; that twist of something
which keep us with only this many words, and no more,
leaving us all but incoherent to ourselves, thus easily misled.

But why, even in dreams, must I dwell on the dark,
the dire, the *drek*? A foal in a dappling field,
I might have dreamed, a child trailing after a rope,
but no, the sense, the scent nearly, the dream-scent,
was wild frustration; not pity but some insane collision
with greed, and power, and credulity, above all.

Perhaps I slept then, perhaps I dreamed my muse,
to whom when she appears I too often say,
“You’re not as seemly as I believed, nor as pure,”
and my muse forsakes me. But perhaps the spider is muse,
or the beetle, or Babel; no wonder she’d betray me,
no wonder, bending her languorous note, she’d forsake me.

Opening exercise: Can you think of a story in a movie or novel in which the victim triumphed over the victimizer? Can you think of a story in which the victimizer triumphed?

Suggested questions for discussion:

1. In the poem “Souls,” what possible motivations might the men have for lashing the stuffed animal to the truck? Why do they dress the stuffed animal in real children’s clothes?
2. the beetle is said to represent “the generalized human person.” Is this representation accurate? Why or why not?
3. In the poem “Souls,” the stuffed animal is compared to prisoners of war who “must submit” to having their photos taken. Is this comparison accurate? Why or why not?
4. In what ways (if any) does the title “Souls” add to the poem’s possible meanings?
5. In the poem “Chaos,” the spider is said to represent (in addition to power and greed) “abstraction.” How (if at all) does abstraction relate to power and greed?
6. Compare and contrast the ways in which each of these poems portrays the abuse of power.

Teacher Answering Young Radicals

-- Stephen Dunn

Given the choice of blowing up the Empire
State Building or a department store, he said balloons
took his breath away, too.

then he took the wind in his fist
and let it out like a butterfly,
to show what power was.

When no one understood,
he let himself go

and they followed the simple flight of his mind

flower to flower. The he raised his fist
into a hammer and slammed it to the table,
to show what weakness was.

He had them,
and could have lifted them with his voice
to where blood gets thin as air

and honest rage suffocates in the throat.
He told them instead about his fist,
the dull pain up his arm, turning warm.

Fable of the Water Merchant

-- Stephen Dunn

One day the water merchants came
to town, saying "Let the water pass
over our hands, it will taste better."
And the people agreed and became addicted
to the taste.

Then the water merchants threatened
to take away their hands, and the people
brought seed and chickens and placed them
at their feet.

But already the water merchants had carved
replicas of their hands out of wood
and secured them to the river bank.

The people said
"The water tastes different now"
and the water merchants replied "What you
are tasting, friends, is progress,"
and the people began to love it
and gave the merchants everything they wanted.

Opening exercise: Think of a time when you tried to teach someone what was "right" or "wise" or "fair." How did you try to get your point across? What worked? What did not?

Suggested questions for discussion:

1. Can you paraphrase the story told in the poem "Teacher Answering Young Radicals"?
2. In the poem "Teacher Answering Young Radicals," what is the tone of the poem? What lesson is the teacher trying to convey?
3. In what ways are the young radicals trying to wield power? In what ways is the teacher trying to wield power? What are the results?
4. In the poem "Fable of the Water Merchant," what power do the water merchants hold over "the people"? Are "the people" complicit in their own exploitation?

5. Can you think of examples in our own society how “the people” may have (or appear to have) relinquished self-rule in favor of exploitation?
6. When (if at all) might it be necessary to relinquish our self-rule?

The Layers

-- Stanley Kunitz

I have walked through many lives,
some of them my own,
and I am not who I was,
though some principle of being
abides, from which I struggle
not to stray.

When I look behind,
as I am compelled to look
before I can gather strength
to proceed on my journey,
I see the milestones dwindling
toward the horizon
and the slow fires trailing
from the abandoned camp-sites,
over which scavenger angels
wheel on heavy wings.

Oh, I have made myself a tribe
out of my true affections,
and my tribe is scattered!
How shall the heart be reconciled
to its feast of losses?

In a rising wind
the manic dust of my friends,
those who fell along the way,
bitterly stings my face.

Yet I turn, I turn,
exulting somewhat,
with my will intact to go
wherever I need to go,
and every stone on the road
precious to me.

In my darkest night,
when the moon was covered
and I roamed through wreckage,
a nimbus-clouded voice
directed me:

“Live in the layers,
not on the litter.”

Though I lack the art
to decipher it,
no doubt the next chapter
in my book of transformations
is already written.

I am not done with my changes.

Opening exercise: Can you think of a moment in your experience when your view of things changed dramatically? What caused the change? How did this “paradigm shift” affect the course of your life? What didn’t change?

Suggested questions for discussion:

1. What possible meanings might the speaker of the poem have when he says, “I have walked through many lives/ some of them my own”?
 2. The speaker of the poem says, “I am not who I was,/ though some principle of being/ abides, from which I struggle/ not to stray.” To what “principle of being” might the speaker be referring? Where do such principles come from?
 3. The speaker of the poem says, “Oh, I have made myself a tribe/ of my true affections,/ and my tribe is scattered.” What are the possible meanings of this?
 4. The speaker of the poem is advised to “Live in the layers,/ not on the litter.” What are the layers? What is the litter?
 5. Do people ever really change? Or do people basically remain the same? Why or why not?
-

Don’t Do That

-- Stephen Dunn

It was bring-your-own if you wanted anything hard, so I brought Johnnie Walker Red along with some resentment I’d held in for a few weeks, which was not helped by the sight of little nameless things pierced with toothpicks on the tables, or by talk that promised to be nothing if not small. But I’d consented to come, and I knew what part of the house their animals would be sequestered, whose company I loved. What else can I say, except that old retainer of slights and wrongs, that bad boy I hadn’t quite outgrown— I’d brought him along, too. I was out to cultivate a mood. My hosts greeted me, but did not ask about my soul, which was when I was invited by Johnnie Walker Red to find the right kind of glass, and pour. I toasted the air. I said hello to the wall, then walked past a group of women dressed to be seen, undressing them one by one, and went up the stairs to where the Rottweilers were, Rosie and Tom, and got down with them on all fours. They licked the face I offered them, and I proceeded to slick back my hair with their saliva, and before long I felt like a wild thing, ready to mess up the party, scarf the hors d’oeuvres. But the dogs said, No, don’t do that,

calm down, after a while they open the door
and let you out, they pet your head, and everything
you might have held against them is gone,
and you're good friends again. Stay, they said.

Opening exercise: Why have you chosen to join society instead of living as a hermit? In your experience, what's the best thing about socializing? What's the most difficult?

Suggested questions for discussion:

1. What is the "tone" of this poem? Can you point to particular lines in the poem that reveal the speaker's attitudes?
2. The speaker of the poem says he'd brought along "that bad-boy I hadn't quite outgrown." How would you characterize that "bad-boy"? Why would we label those characteristics "bad"?
3. "I felt like a wild thing, ready to mess up the party," says the speaker. Is this a common human desire? If so, what stops us? Where does that desire come from in the first place?
4. What do the dogs advise? Is it good advice? Why or why not?
5. Dogs, like wolves, are pack animals. What are the benefits of living as a pack? What are the drawbacks?
6. Are humans pack animals? Or something else? If so, what?

Fish

C.K. Williams

On the sidewalk in front
of a hairdresser's supply store
lay the head of a fish,
largish, pointy, perhaps a pike's.

It must recently have been left there;
its scales shone and its visible eye
had enough light left in it still
so it looked as they will do for awhile

astonished and disconsolate
to have been brought to such a pass:
its incision was clean, brutal, precise;
it had to have come in one blow.

In the showcase window behind,
other heads, women's and men's,
bewigged, painstakingly coiffed,
stared out, as though at the fish,

as though stunned, aghast, too –
though they were hardly surprised:
hadn't they known all along
that life, that frenzy, that folly,

that flesh-thing, would come
sooner or later to this? It hurts,
life, just as much as it might,
and it ends, always, like this.

Better stay here, with eyes of glass,
like people in advertisements,
and without bodies or blood,
like people in poems.

Opening exercise: Think of moment in your experience when you felt joyful just to be alive.
What factors made you feel this joy?

Suggested questions for discussion:

1. What's the situation of this poem? Why the fish? Why the manikins?
 2. Why, when the manikins look at the fish, are they "hardly surprised"?
 3. What is the speaker's attitude toward the fish? Toward the manikins?
 4. Who is better off, the fish or the makikins? Why or why not? If the fish could speak, what might he say?
 5. The poem says, "It hurts,/ life, just as much as it might,/ and it ends, always, like this."
When does life hurt? Should hurt be avoided?
 6. How might joy and pain be related?
-

Mending Wall

-- Robert Frost

Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
That sends the frozen-ground-swell under it,
And spills the upper boulders in the sun;
And makes gaps even two can pass abreast.
The work of hunters is another thing:
I have come after them and made repair
Where they have left not one stone on a stone,
But they would have the rabbit out of hiding,
To please the yelping dogs. The gaps I mean,
No one has seen them made or heard them made,
But at spring mending-time we find them there.
I let my neighbor know beyond the hill;
And on a day we meet to walk the line
And set the wall between us once again.
We keep the wall between us as we go.
To each the boulders that have fallen to each.
And some are loaves and some so nearly balls
We have to use a spell to make them balance:
"Stay where you are until our backs are turned!"
We wear our fingers rough with handling them.
Oh, just another kind of out-door game,

One on a side. It comes to little more:
There where it is we do not need the wall:
He is all pine and I am apple orchard.
My apple trees will never get across
And eat the cones under his pines, I tell him.
He only says, "Good fences make good neighbors."
Spring is the mischief in me, and I wonder
If I could put a notion in his head:
"Why do they make good neighbors? Isn't it
Where there are cows? But here there are no cows.
Before I built a wall I'd ask to know
What I was walling in or walling out,
And to whom I was like to give offence.
Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
That wants it down." I could say "Elves" to him,
But it's not elves exactly, and I'd rather
He said it for himself. I see him there
Bringing a stone grasped firmly by the top
In each hand, like an old-stone savage armed.
He moves in darkness as it seems to me,
Not of woods only and the shade of trees.
He will not go behind his father's saying,
And he likes having thought of it so well
He says again, "Good fences make good neighbors."

Opening exercise: Building walls. Tearing down walls. What's your gut reaction to these phrases? Which do you favor?

Suggested questions for discussion:

1. Can you paraphrase the "story" of this poem? Why are the two men doing what they are doing?
2. One man says, "Something there is that doesn't love a wall." What evidence does he give for this claim?
3. The other man says, "Good fences make good neighbors." What reasons does this man give for his claim.
4. "Something there is that doesn't love a wall." In nature, how is this true? How is this not true?
5. "Good fences make good neighbors." What about walls between nations? What about personal boundaries?
6. Walls vs. no walls. Is there no middle ground? If so, what?

To a Terrorist

-- Stephen Dunn

For the historical ache, the ache passed down
which finds its circumstance and becomes
the present ache, I offer this poem

without hope, knowing there's nothing,
not even revenge, which alleviates
a life like yours. I offer it as one

might offer his father's ashes
to the wind, a gesture
when there's nothing else to do.

Still, I must say to you:
I hate your good reasons.
I hate the hatefulness that makes you fall

in love with death, your own included.
Perhaps you're hating me now,
I who own my own house

and live in a country so muscular,
so smug, it thinks its terror is meant
only to mean well, and to protect.

Christ turned his singular cheek,
one man's holiness another's absurdity.
Like you, the rest of us obey the sting,

the surge. I'm just speaking out loud
to cancel my silence. Consider it an old impulse,
doomed to become mere words.

The first poet probably spoke to thunder
and, for a while, believed
thunder had an ear and a choice.

Opening exercise: Is there anything that might be said to dissuade a terrorist? What are the possible approaches? Which do you favor?

Suggested questions for discussion:

1. What is the “tone” of this poem? What is the speaker’s attitude toward the terrorist?
 2. If the terrorist could reply, what might he/she say?
 3. What is meant by “the historical ache, the ache passed down/ which finds its circumstance and becomes/ the present ache”?
 4. The speaker says to the terrorist, “I hate your good reasons.” How might the terrorist’s reasons be “good”?
 5. “Christ turned his singular cheek,/ one man's holiness another's absurdity.” What can this statement mean? How might holiness and absurdity relate?
 6. Can revenge be justified? Can killing be justified? When does revenge and killing constitute “terrorism”? When might we call it something else?
-

On the Death of a Colleague

-- Stephen Dunn

She taught theater, so we gathered
in the theater.
We praised her voice, her knowledge,
how good she was
with *Godot* and just four months later
with *Gigi*.
She was fifty. The problem in the liver.
Each of us recalled
an incident in which she'd been kind
or witty.
I told about being unable to speak
from my diaphragm
and how she made me lie down, placed her hand
where the failure was
and showed me how to breathe.
But afterwards
I only could do it when I lay down
and that became a joke
between us, and I told it as my offering
to the audience.
I was on stage and I heard myself
wishing to be impressive.
Someone else spoke of her cats
and no one spoke
of her face or the last few parties.
The fact was
I had avoided her for months.

It was a student's turn to speak, a sophomore,
one of her actors.
She was a drunk, he said, often came to class
reeking.
Sometimes he couldn't look at her, the blotches,
the awful puffiness.
And yet she was a great teacher,
he loved her,
but thought someone should say
what everyone knew
because she didn't die by accident.

Everyone was crying. Everyone was crying and it
was almost over now.
The remaining speaker, an historian, said he'd cut
his speech short.
And the Chairman stood up as if by habit,
said something about loss
and thanked us for coming. None of us moved
except some students

to the student who'd spoken, and then others
moved to him, across dividers,
down aisles, to his side of the stage.

Opening exercise: "The truth will set you free." Do you agree? Why or why not? Give examples.

Suggested questions for discussion:

1. What is the "tone" of this poem? What is the speaker's attitude toward his colleagues? Toward himself? Toward the student who spoke?
 2. How might the colleagues justify leaving unsaid what they left unsaid?
 3. How might the student justify saying what he said?
 4. Is there such a thing as too much truth? Give examples.
 5. If the dead woman could talk, how might she apprise what was said or left unsaid at her funeral?
 6. Why, at the close of the poem, do others gather around the student who spoke? In what ways might the student's comments be seen as appropriate? In what ways inappropriate?
-

The Summer Day

-- Mary Oliver

Who made the world?
Who made the swan, and the black bear?
Who made the grasshopper?
This grasshopper, I mean-
the one who has flung herself out of the grass,
the one who is eating sugar out of my hand,
who is moving her jaws back and forth instead of up and down-
who is gazing around with her enormous and complicated eyes.
Now she lifts her pale forearms and thoroughly washes her face.
Now she snaps her wings open, and floats away.
I don't know exactly what a prayer is.
I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down
into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,
how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,
which is what I have been doing all day.
Tell me, what else should I have done?
Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?
Tell me, what is it you plan to do
with your one wild and precious life?

The Black Snake

-- Mary Oliver

When the black snake
flashed onto the morning road,
and the truck could not swerve--

death, that is how it happens.

Now he lies looped and useless
as an old bicycle tire.
I stop the car
and carry him into the bushes.

He is as cool and gleaming
as a braided whip, he is as beautiful and quiet
as a dead brother.
I leave him under the leaves

and drive on, thinking
about *death*: its suddenness,
its terrible weight,
its certain coming.

Yet, under reason burns a brighter fire
Yet under reason burns a brighter fire
which the bones have always preferred.
It is the story of endless good fortune.
It says to oblivion: not me!

It is the light at the center of every cell.
It is what sent the snake coiling and flowing forward
happily all spring through the green leaves before
he came to the road.

Opening exercise: Can you think of a moment in your experience, when you've drawn a lesson from an encounter with one of nature's creatures? What did you learn?

Suggested questions for discussion:

1. In the poem, "The Summer Day," the first line asks a question but does not answer it. Can you answer it?
 2. In the poem, "The Summer Day," the speaker says, "I don't know exactly what a prayer is." Is she praying? If so, how?
 3. In the poem, "The Summer Day," in what ways does the speaker "pay attention"?
 4. In the poem, "The Black Snake," why does the speaker describe the snake as "beautiful and quiet as a dead brother"? How might you argue against this description? How might you justify this description?
 5. In the poem, "The Black Snake," what is the "brighter fire which the bones have always preferred"?
 6. In what ways are humans part of nature? In what ways have humans separated themselves from nature?
-

Lying in a Hammock at William Duffy's Farm in Pine Island, Minnesota

-- James Wright

Over my head, I see the bronze butterfly,
Asleep on the black trunk,
Blowing like a leaf in green shadow.
Down the ravine behind the empty house,
The cowbells follow one another
Into the distances of the afternoon.
To my right,
In a field of sunlight between two pines,
The droppings of last year's horses
Blaze up into golden stones.
I lean back, as the evening darkens and comes on.
A chicken hawk floats over, looking for home.
I have wasted my life.

By Frasier Creek Falls

-- Gary Snyder

Standing up on lifted, folded rock
looking out and down --

The creek falls to a far valley.
Hills beyond that
facing, half-forested, dry
-- clear sky
strong wind in the stiff needle clusters
of the pine -- their brown
round trunk bodies
straight, still;
rustling trembling limbs and twigs

listen.

This living flowing land
is all there is, forever

We are it
it sings through us --

We could live on this Earth
without clothes or tools!

Opening exercise: Can you think of a moment in your experience when you went into nature for recreation such as boating, skiing, four-wheeling, etc.? Can you think of a moment in your experience when you went into nature just to listen? What were the best parts of each?

Suggested questions for discussion:

1. What is the speaker of the poem “doing” on William Duffy’s farm? What is the speaker of the poem “doing” by Frasier Creek Falls?
 2. Why might the speaker of the poem “Lying in a Hammock . . .” conclude that “I have wasted my life”? What could this possibly mean?
 3. Why does the speaker of the poem “By Frasier Creek Falls” say, “This living flowing land/ is all there is, forever”? Why does he say, “We are it/ it sings through us”?
 4. Is it possible to “live on this Earth without clothes or tools”? Why might the speaker of the poem make such a claim?
 5. Are these two poems “romanticizing” nature? Do humans have a tendency to romanticize nature? Or do humans commonly have the opposite reaction to nature?
 6. Think about your response to the opening exercise. What are the different ways in which humans commune with nature? How do we conflict with nature?
-

To Christ Our Lord

by Galway Kinnel

The legs of the elk punctured the snow's crust
And wolves floated lightfooted on the land
Hunting Christmas elk living and frozen.
Indoors snow melted in a basin and a woman basted
A bird spread over coals by its wings and head.
Snow had sealed the windows; candles lit
The Christmas meal. The special grace chilled
The cooked bird, being long-winded and the room cold.
During the words a boy thought, is it fitting
To eat this creature killed on the wing?
For he had shot it himself, climbing out
Alone on snowshoes in the Christmas dawn,
The fallen snow swirling and the snowfall gone,
Heard its throat scream as the rifle shouted,
Watched it drop, and fished from the snow the dead.
He had not wanted to shoot. The sound
Of wings beating into the hushed morning
Had stirred his love, and the things
In his gloves froze, and he wondered,
Even famishing, could he fire? Then he fired.
Now the grace praised his wicked act. At its end
The bird on the plate
Stared at his stricken appetite.
There had been nothing to do but surrender,
To kill and to eat; he ate as he had killed, with wonder.
At night on snowshoes on the drifting field
He wondered again, for whom had love stirred?
The stars glittered on the snow and nothing answered.
Then the Swan spread her wings, cross of the cold north,
The pattern and mirror of the acts of earth.

Crossing a City Highway

-- Yusef Komunyakaa

The city at 3 a.m. is an ungodly mask
the approaching day hides behind
& from, the coyote nosing forth,
the muscles of something ahead,

& a fiery blaze of eighteen-wheelers
zoom out of the curved night trees,
along the rim of absolute chance.
A question hangs in the oily air.

She knows he will follow her scent
left in the poisoned grass & buzz
of chainsaws, if he can unweave
a circle of traps around the subdivision.

For a breathy moment, she stops
on the world's edge, & then quick as that
masters the stars & again slips the noose
& darts straight between sedans & SUVs.

Don't try to hide from her kind of blues
or the dead nomads who walked trails
now paved by wanderlust, an epoch
somewhere between tamed & wild.

If it were Monday instead of Sunday
the outcome may be different,
but she's now in Central Park
searching for a Seneca village

among painted stones & shrubs,
where she's never been, & lucky
she hasn't forgotten how to jig
& kill her way home.

Opening exercise: If you could choose to be an animal, would you be a wild animal or a domesticated animal? Why?

Suggested questions for discussion:

1. In the poem, "To Christ Our Lord," why does the boy have second thoughts about shooting the bird?
2. In the poem, "To Christ Our Lord," the speaker of the poem says "there had been nothing to do but surrender/ To kill and eat." What is the boy surrendering to?

3. At the close of the poem "To Christ Our Lord," what does the speaker of the poem mean when he says that the Swan's spread wings suggest "The pattern and mirror of the acts of earth"?
 4. In the poem, "Crossing a City Highway," the speaker of the poem says, "A question hangs in the oily air." What is the question? Is there more than one question?
 5. When speaking of the Coyote, the speaker of the poem "Crossing a City Highway" advises the reader: "Don't try to hide from her kind of blues." What are the implications of this advice?
 6. What are the benefits and drawbacks to being a domesticated animal? What are the benefits and drawbacks to being a wild animal?
-

The Wood-Pile

-- Robert Frost

Out walking in the frozen swamp one gray day,
I paused and said, 'I will turn back from here.
No, I will go on farther—and we shall see.'
The hard snow held me, save where now and then
One foot went through. The view was all in lines
Straight up and down of tall slim trees
Too much alike to mark or name a place by
So as to say for certain I was here
Or somewhere else: I was just far from home.
A small bird flew before me. He was careful
To put a tree between us when he lighted,
And say no word to tell me who he was
Who was so foolish as to think what *he* thought.
He thought that I was after him for a feather—
The white one in his tail; like one who takes
Everything said as personal to himself.
One flight out sideways would have undeceived him.
And then there was a pile of wood for which
I forgot him and let his little fear
Carry him off the way I might have gone,
Without so much as wishing him good-night.
He went behind it to make his last stand.
It was a cord of maple, cut and split
And piled—and measured, four by four by eight.
And not another like it could I see.
No runner tracks in this year's snow looped near it.
And it was older sure than this year's cutting,
Or even last year's or the year's before.
The wood was gray and the bark warping off it
And the pile somewhat sunken. Clematis
Had wound strings round and round it like a bundle.
What held it though on one side was a tree
Still growing, and on one a stake and prop,
These latter about to fall. I thought that only
Someone who lived in turning to fresh tasks
Could so forget his handiwork on which

He spent himself, the labor of his ax,
And leave it there far from a useful fireplace
To warm the frozen swamp as best it could
With the slow smokeless burning of decay.

Mowing

-- Robert Frost

There was never a sound beside the wood but one,
And that was my long scythe whispering to the ground.
What was it it whispered? I knew not well myself;
Perhaps it was something about the heat of the sun,
Something, perhaps, about the lack of sound—
And that was why it whispered and did not speak.
It was no dream of the gift of idle hours,
Or easy gold at the hand of fay or elf:
Anything more than the truth would have seemed too weak
To the earnest love that laid the swale in rows,
Not without feeble-pointed spikes of flowers
(Pale orchises), and scared a bright green snake.
The fact is the sweetest dream that labor knows.
My long scythe whispered and left the hay to make.

Opening exercise: Can you think of a moment in your experience when you felt you were doing pleasurable and valuable work? What made your work pleasurable? What made it valuable?

Suggested questions for discussion:

1. In the poem, “Woodpile,” why is the speaker puzzled when he finds the woodpile?
 2. Why might the woodcutter have abandoned the woodpile? What sort of person is he?
 3. The poem “Woodpile” ends with “the slow smokeless burning of decay.” Were the woodcutters labors wasted?
 4. In the poem, “Mowing,” the scythe “whispers.” What does the speaker suppose the scythe is saying? What other possible meanings might this “whispering” have?
 5. In the poem, “Mowing,” the speaker claims: “The fact is the sweetest dream that labor knows.” How might this line be interpreted?
 6. In these two poems, what are the author’s attitudes toward work? What makes work pleasurable? What makes work valuable?
-

What Work Is

-- Philip Levine

We stand in the rain in a long line
waiting at Ford Highland Park. For work.
You know what work is—if you're
old enough to read this you know what
work is, although you may not do it.
Forget you. This is about waiting,
shifting from one foot to another.
Feeling the light rain falling like mist
into your hair, blurring your vision
until you think you see your own brother
ahead of you, maybe ten places.
You rub your glasses with your fingers,
and of course it's someone else's brother,
narrower across the shoulders than
yours but with the same sad slouch, the grin
that does not hide the stubbornness,
the sad refusal to give in to
rain, to the hours of wasted waiting,
to the knowledge that somewhere ahead
a man is waiting who will say, "No,
we're not hiring today," for any
reason he wants. You love your brother,
now suddenly you can hardly stand
the love flooding you for your brother,
who's not beside you or behind or
ahead because he's home trying to
sleep off a miserable night shift
at Cadillac so he can get up
before noon to study his German.
Works eight hours a night so he can sing
Wagner, the opera you hate most,
the worst music ever invented.
How long has it been since you told him
you loved him, held his wide shoulders,
opened your eyes wide and said those words,
and maybe kissed his cheek? You've never
done something so simple, so obvious,
not because you're too young or too dumb,
not because you're jealous or even mean
or incapable of crying in
the presence of another man, no,
just because you don't know what work is.

Myrtle

-- Ted Kooser

Wearing her yellow rubber slicker,
Myrtle, our *Journal* carrier,
has come early through rain and darkness
to bring us the news.

A woman of thirty or so,
with three small children at home,
she's told me she likes
a long walk by herself in the morning.

And with pride in her work,
she's wrapped the news neatly in plastic –
a bread bag, beaded with rain,
that reads WONDER.

From my doorway I watch her
flicker from porch to porch as she goes,
a yellow candle flame
no wind or weather dare extinguish.

Opening exercise: What was your best job? What was your worst? Why?

Suggested questions for discussion:

1. In the beginning of the poem “What Work Is,” the speaker states, “You know what work is.” By the end of the poem, the speaker claims the opposite, “You don’t know what work is.” What accounts for this change?
 2. In the poem, “What Work Is,” the men are waiting in line while a light rain falls. What might be the significance that the rain distorts the speaker’s vision? Why does the speaker call the man ahead of him in line, “someone else’s brother”?
 3. In the poem, “Myrtle,” why does the newspaper carrier wrap the news in plastic bread bags?
 4. In the poem, “Myrtle,” why does the speaker describe the newspaper carrier as “a yellow candle flame/ no wind or weather dare extinguish.” Is this a romantic notion, or a realistic notion?
 5. Compare and contrast the man waiting in line and the newspaper carrier. What are their attitudes toward work? Why might cause the attitudes of these two workers to differ?
 6. In the poem, “Myrtle,” the speaker claims that the young woman newspaper carrier simply “likes a long walk by herself in the morning.” What other reasons might there be for her to enjoy her work?
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The Good Life

-- Tracy K. Smith

When some people talk about money
They speak as if it were a mysterious lover
Who went out to buy milk and never
Came back, and it makes me nostalgic
For the years I lived on coffee and bread,
Hungry all the time, walking to work on payday
Like a woman journeying for water
From a village without a well, then living
One or two nights like everyone else
On roast chicken and red wine.

My Brother's Work

-- Stephen Dunn

My brother who knows
the indignity of work
rides home with the taste of it
turning peptic, that odor
of swallowed pride rising
into his breath, his wife waiting
for the kiss that's so full
of the day she can't bear it.
My brother who hears the shout
of bosses, who is no boss himself,
only shouts at home,
thinks shouting is what permits
the bosses to move
with the easy self-
fulfilled gait of leopards
who've eaten all they've killed.
My brother who will not leave
his job wonders how Gauguin left
the world and found himself
on the other side of it.
"What *balls*," he says, "braver
than suicide." My brother
who is no less than anyone
circumstance has made
to do its bidding, who wants
to rise in the morning against
all odds and slip
into his leopard body,
my brother is
coming home now and his wife
is waiting for the kiss.

Opening exercise: What constitutes “work with dignity”? In your experience, when have you felt your work had dignity? When did it not? Why?

Suggested questions for discussion:

1. In the poem, “The Good Life,” what is the speaker nostalgic for? Why?
 2. What is “the good life”? How does work help us achieve the good life? How does work keep us from attaining the good life?
 3. In the poem, “My Brother’s Work,” how does the brother suffer from the indignity of his work? What is the relationship between “shouting” and authority?
 4. In the poem, “My Brother’s Work,” how are the bosses like “leopards”? Does the brother dislike his bosses? Does he want to emulate them?
 5. In the poem, “My Brother’s Work,” the brother admires Gauguin for “the balls” to flee work-world pressures by living elsewhere. How might work be different in different places. How do cultural values affect the workplace?
 6. Can your work “consume” you in good ways? How else might your work be “consuming”?
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