



## **Who's Your Daddy? Comprehension Strategies and Poetry Basics through Poems about Fathers**

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### **Introduction**

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As a middle school English teacher, one of the first units that I teach to my students in the fall is an introduction to poetry. And in spite of their refreshed academic attitudes that result from a well-deserved summer break, I invariably hear the groans and complaints as I prepare students to study poetry. Lately, I have come to the conclusion that their resistance is little more than fear. Like many of us, they are uncomfortable because they do not know how to approach and respond to this type of literature with confidence. If we as educators can teach students comprehension strategies such as clarification and connecting to the literature, their ability to think critically will improve. Not only will they be able to speak intelligently about poetry, but they will have the necessary intellectual tools to confidently approach many types of literature.

### **Rationale**

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Middle schoolers are like most students in that they are more attentive when they feel a connection to what they are being presented with. Perhaps the reason so many students feel helpless and apathetic when it comes to studying poetry is that they often feel that its content and style are too far removed from their personal experiences. Maybe the key to making poetry less intimidating to students is to begin their study of it with content that they can readily relate to. Eventually students' capabilities will be developed and their confidence strengthened; they can then be given a wider variety of poems, and the ones that had at one time caused confusion will perhaps be more accessible to them. As our seminar leader said, teachers have the opportunity to open students' minds to "the ways in which poetry surprises us out of our normal habits of perception" by helping them see common people in a new light. In this unit, we will look at "fathers."

The fear that students feel when approaching poetry is a result of the fact that they think it is too removed from their personal experience. It would probably surprise students greatly to learn that some great theorists share their ideas and feel that poetry that accomplishes its goal is not the stale, talky, intellectual stuff that

often confuses them. Instead, poetry should put us back in touch with the "freshness of things" (Brooks and Warren, 68). When poetry strays away from a connection with the senses, it loses that freshness, and, mostly likely, its interest. Our goal is to expose students to this kind of "good poetry", that is, poetry that relies on the dramatic presentation of a particular type in its concreteness in our case a person to whom they can all relate, the father (or father figure). Our goals in this unit include introducing students to the basics of poetry and teaching comprehension strategies that they can effectively apply independently. We also have the more affective goal of awakening students to the agency that they possess in their individual situations. Reflection can lead to success. In spite of even the dreariest or most disturbing of relationships that they have to face personally, recognizing and calling attention to those situations gives students a chance to be more fully aware of how they can make choices that will positively affect their futures.

Additionally, as teachers we must attend to the connection between reading and writing. There is a direct relationship between these two variables, so it is in the best interest of our students for us to work to improve both of these areas of their linguistic development. Since many of my students are struggling readers, this unit includes within its study of poetry the teaching of certain comprehension strategies. Once taught, practiced and applied, these strategies make independent readers out of dependent ones. The list of strategies that help students understand texts better includes: clarifying, comparing and contrasting, connecting to prior experiences, inferencing (generalizing and drawing conclusions), predicting, questioning the text, recognizing the author's craft, seeing causal relationships, summarizing and visualizing. Arguably, one could teach all of these within the context of this unit, even though some students need practice with one strategy more than with others. Individual modifications are always best assessed and adopted by the permanent teacher, but for our purposes, I am suggesting a focus on clarifying, visualizing and connecting to prior experiences. The real benefit from this aspect of the unit comes in the actual *teaching* of these strategies. We expect students to be able to apply these strategies without explicitly teaching them how to do that. If we really want to develop independent readers, these skills *must* be taught explicitly. Through think-alouds and repeatedly reinforcing both the names and processes involved in these strategies, students' reading comprehension will rise because they have been adequately equipped.

### **Essential Understandings**

Students will complete this unit with the following realizations:

- Poetry *can* be understood! Strategies like clarifying, visualizing and connecting to prior experiences aid in that understanding.
- Poetry is different from prose.
- Poetry allows us to remember freely; consciously remembering our personal histories allows us to more positively affect our futures.

## **Imagist and Confessional Poetry**

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"To use the language of common speech, but to employ always the exact word, not the nearly-exact, nor the merely decorative word." According to the Academy of American Poets, that was the manifesto of poetry's Imagist Movement. It began in the early 20th century and, as a movement, was officially over by 1917. Its ideas, however, of economy and exactness of language that aptly captures an *image* (hence the title of the

movement) have influenced the poetry of later authors. Key poets during this time included Amy Lowell, William Carlos Williams and Ezra Pound. Pound's "In a Station at the Metro" is a solid example of how Imagist poets sought to efficiently get at the essence of an experience. The poem is only two lines long and seeks to bring into sharp focus the experience of seeing beautiful faces on a subway pass you by as you wait on the platform. This poem, typical of others during this movement, focused on expressing a particular experience with vivid clarity.

About forty years later, Confessional Poetry arose as another movement. Confessional poetry's inclusion of gritty and personal details distinctly separates the speaker, who is generally the poet, from the rest of the world. It is truly poetry of the *self*-uncensored and, sometimes, untrue. It shouldn't be too surprising, once we consider it, that confessional poetry is a fairly recent sub-genre. It is a sort of autobiographical retelling of a poet's life as he remembers it, and, let's face it, some of those memories aren't too pretty. It must have taken an unimaginable amount of personal strength to be among the first to "confess" that one's life was not as neat and tidy as the American sitcom would have us hope. During "the tranquilized fifties," artists like Robert Lowell and Sylvia Plath began to share their memories of their struggles, their fears and their relationships in loud, unabashed detail, which was in stark contrast to what had been written prior to that time. What distinguished confessional poets is their radical focus on themes that had been previously avoided in favor of a more idealized view of life.

Explicitly, neither of these Movements directly deals with the theme of fathers, though individual poems within them may, but both of them have traits that speak to the idea of the poet as "rememberer." In other words, poets use the effectiveness of common speech and the intention of capturing experience of the Imagists, together with the raw, un-edited feel of Confessional Poetry to speak about fathers. With these things in mind, one can see why poetry is an admirable and effective way of communicating about relationships. As Rainer Maria Rilke said, "Poems are, not as people think, simply emotions...they are experiences"(poets.org). In other words, not only is reading a poem an experience that one enjoys, but poems also allow both poet and reader to enter into a moment in the speaker's memory. The freedom of spirit inspired by the confessional poets allows the poet to speak in earnest; the tenets of Imagism allow the poet to capture one moment. With these features working together, a poem has the potential to speak precisely about a person, place or thing as the poet remembers it, regardless of how accurate that memory may be. Poetry gives the poet the ability to speak in a way that invites the reader to relate to the poet because they do not simply invoke emotion; they recreate experience.

## Strategies as the Unit Unfolds

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Each week will serve as the basis for teaching, practicing and applying a different comprehension strategy. The order that I have chosen for teaching these strategies is more or less arbitrary, but I think that they are arranged in such a way that the skills do build on one another. You could easily alter it without greatly affecting the final outcome, since the skills do reinforce each other but are not necessarily cumulative. If you do restructure the order, be advised that the supplements/teaching rubrics will also need slight revisions. The structure for weeks two through four all function in about the same way. The first two days of the week are spent introducing the strategy and the poem that you will use to teach it. The next two days of the week allow students to practice with another poem based on the same concept. This is guided practice; students should work and get feedback in class so that the final day of the week can be reserved for independent practice that

will enable the teacher to evaluate their progress on this strategy. I have suggested poems from the poem list at the end of this unit for each week's lesson. Most of them aren't repeated, but you may want to use some of the same poems for successive portions of your study. Teaching rubrics are provided for each of the strategies and can be used throughout each of the individual weeks. This isn't problematic because each week allows for three stages: introduction, guided practice and independent practice. For each of these stages, scaffolding will be provided to a decreasing extent as you progress through the week. That is to say, at the first stage, teachers guide and provide most of the answers. In the second stage, teachers use leading questions to allow students to provide most of their own answers so that by the third stage the teacher is only observing and responding to students' individual needs.

Embedded in this study are the basics of poetry because this unit is designed to be taught at the beginning of the school year. That way, you can continually include the study of poetry throughout the year without having to interrupt the flow of instruction to introduce the foundation that we establish here. Even if poetry is not included in your school's curriculum, including poems that can supplement what you are studying one to two times a month will ensure that what students learned in this unit is reinforced so that they do not lose all the skills that they acquired here. As far as the strategies go, reinforce them throughout the year by posting their names and brief reminders about how to use them around your room. Also, remind students to use them, especially as you begin the study of a text that will cause them difficulty.

### **Week One: Building Background**

This is the foundational week for our study of poetry. We want student interest and their awareness that our upcoming literary journey is relevant to their lives *rightnow*. To that end, a popular song that is about fathers should be used initially. Type the lyrics and omit key words so that what results is like a cloze activity. I have chosen "Dance with My Father" by Luther Vandross, but you may feel that another song is more appropriate. Tell students that they will be expected to think about their fathers, then fill in the lyrics sheet with words that remind them of their fathers. Be careful of sensitive situations by giving students the option to write about a father figure who could be a brother, uncle or female relative. Students can share their work in small groups or with the whole class. As a conclusion, discuss and make a class graphic organizer about the characteristics students remembered about their fathers based on their lyrics.

During this week, also be sure to introduce key vocabulary including: line, stanza, speaker, alliteration, metaphor, simile, image, couplet, rhyme, rhythm, paraphrase, hyperbole, enjambment. This list is by no means comprehensive and was constructed with this introductory unit in mind. As you come back to poems throughout the year (and perhaps even to celebrate National Poetry Month in April), you can add to this list or share more of it with students. I personally find that flashcards are an effective way to reinforce new concepts and teach a valuable study technique that many middle-schoolers do not develop or practice. I usually make an oversized "sample set." Before I let students make their own flashcards, I show them my set and how you can study with them. This is a key step that I have added because there are nearly always students who either have only a foggy idea or no idea at all how flashcards should work.

### **Week Two: Remembering Fathers: Clarifying**

During this week, we will focus our study on applying the vocabulary that we have been building over the previous week, so in your discussion of the poems be sure to use the new vocabulary. For this week's strategy, students should practice with the idea that clarifying texts, particularly as you read, improves comprehension. Before you begin, remind them of the activity from Week One so that they can be continuously aware of the thematic connection among the poems we are studying. Begin with "Men at Forty."

Since it is a short poem barely three lines long, it will be less intimidating to reluctant readers. Model for students what you would be thinking as you read this with an emphasis on pausing and clarifying confusing parts (Example: "Hmm...I know that this is probably about the speaker's father from the title. I am not sure why she says she tried to kill her father. Let's read on and maybe I will find out."). This think-aloud will be extremely helpful when students begin to apply this strategy over the next few days. They will have a basis for their own work because they have seen it in action. You will want to use the Clarifying rubric or a variation thereof for this opening activity. Keep in mind that, due to formatting restrictions, none of the supplements/rubrics are fancy; my goal was to provide you with a solid foundation that you can easily alter to fit your tastes. Here it the first one:

### *Clarifying*

Directions: Read the poem that you have been given, then respond to the following questions.

1. What does it mean to "clarify" something?
2. What is the title and author of your poem?
3. Practice *visualizing*: As you read this poem, what images come to mind? Draw a picture here of what you see.
4. Practice *visualizing*: Look at your response to number 3. In the space below, write the words or phrases that made you think of what you drew in number 3.
5. In the chart below, choose 4 lines or groups of lines that confuse you. Next, write each one in prose form to help you figure out what it means. Finally, write what you think it means in the final column.

#### **Quote from the Poem... Prose From What I think the quote means...**

7. How does clarifying help you understand texts?

At this point, now, students are ready for guided practice. Remember to reinforce the strategy that you are teaching. Give students one of the two remaining poems for that week. They should use the supplement above to read and respond to it. Once that is accomplished, discuss their answers and make sure they understand how that particular strategy can aid in understanding future poems and future texts. You may find it useful to develop a set of questions to prepare for this discussion.

Next comes the first of three mini-evaluations that will take place at the end of each week which is their independent practice using a poem from the list and the supplement for that week.. For this week's strategy, I suggest using these poems from the poem list: "Yesterday", "Daddy" (excerpts may be appropriate) and "Men at Forty". Choose one of these poems to have students complete this assignment. Below is a sample analysis to guide your discussions during this week.

"Men at Forty" is short, so may be a less intimidating introductory poem for your students. Though not explicitly about fathers, this poem does suggest some things about men who are forty years old and who usually are fathers. It is full of ideas that need to be clarified. Your task is to help students do this. For example, why do these men shut doors "softly"? Have students think about the opposite of gently shutting a door; why don't these men slam doors and why is that worth mentioning? Perhaps this is something that they learned from their own fathers ("Don't slam that door, son!"), but if that is true, they would have probably learned to do this successfully long before they reach forty. Indeed, most grown men do not go around slamming doors, but the poem leaves us with the implication that *life* is the teacher and that the "doors" and "rooms" are actual objects but are also symbolic of phases of life. In other words, these men have learned that

good endings are gentle ones. The missing punctuation at the end of the poem further suggests the importance of finishing well. The supplement is a good guide for students as they try their hand at this comprehension strategy.

### **Week Three: Remembering Fathers: Visualizing**

Procedures for weeks three and four follow the same sequence as that of week two. For this week, I suggest "My Papa's Waltz", "Those Winter Sundays" and "Whose Mouth do I speak with". Begin with Robert Hayden's poem. Discuss what it means as well as the challenging vocabulary, such as "austere offices." Be sure that students are aware of the theme and the strategy. Have students draw the image that comes to mind as they read this poem. Have them share and discuss their drawings, then show them "Humble Poor." Duplications can be easily obtained online. This painting was paired with Hayden's poem in *Words with Wings*, a children's book with outstanding color. Discuss why the book's editor chose this painting and how it differs from what students drew.

Be sure that the second column of the chart in the supplement is filled out and discussed throughout each of this week's stages. It is not enough to just draw a picture,; students must know what language led them to the picture that they see in their minds. Going back to the text makes the strategy more readily available for future use because they are consciously aware of how language can provide pictures that make text easier to understand. Below is the supplement and a sample analysis of "My Papa's Waltz":

#### *Visualizing*

Directions: Read the poem that you have been given, then respond to the following questions.

1. What does it mean to "visualize" something?
2. What is the title and author of your poem?
3. Practice *visualizing*: After you read the poem, draw a picture of what it brings to your mind.
4. Practice *visualizing*: Look at your picture in number 2. Now, go back through the poem and write the words or phrases that made you think of the picture that you drew. Next to each quote, write how each one contributed to what you saw in your mind.

#### **Quote from the Poem... How it affected what I saw...**

6. How does visualizing help you understand texts?

In "My Papa's Waltz", students will first need to tackle key vocabulary that may cause them difficulty, including: waltz (Have they seen one before?), whiskey, romped, countenance, "beat time". After that, you may find it helpful to encourage students to visualize this scene. Additionally, some of your students may connect strongly to this memory of a drunken parent. You can find an audio version of this poem online at [www.poets.org](http://www.poets.org); that reading will help you introduce its sing-song rhythm that reinforces the fact that this is a *child's* memory of his father. He was quite young when this happened, and we get the sense that this was a regular occurrence not only from the repetitive rhythm, but also from the last line when the speaker says that he "still" clung to his father's shirt. So consistent was this behavior that it felt choreographed, like a dance, to this young boy. He could, and does, tell us exactly what his father would do first, describe the look on his mother's face (though she did not intervene) and how the whole episode would end. Although this could be nothing more than a parent's frustrated response to a child's resistance to bedtime, we are given the sense



## Week Five: Poetry vs. Prose

This week should be an exploration of how poetry accomplishes what prose cannot. For this week, students will need to activate their knowledge of the comprehension skills that they have been learning and practicing. For this teaching stage (before we move into guided practice for the next stage and independent practice thereafter), a poem that we have previously analyzed may be best. First, read through the poem. Remind students to visualize, clarify and connect as they go, to aid in their comprehension. Discuss what the poem is about in loose terms. Have students put the entire poem in prose as a class, with you as the teacher guiding the "translation." Have a class recorder who writes the class's answers on chart paper. After you have finished, reread your work to be sure that you have maintained the integrity of the poem. You may want to display both the original with the prose version of each of your classes so that students can compare what has been done in other classes to their own work.

Next comes guided practice. Give students another poem. Have them translate it into prose on their own. Remind them to use their comprehension strategies as they read. Once they have finished, lead a discussion about their various translations. In groups, have students come up with a list of characteristics that differentiate prose from poetry. As a class, discuss the individual lists and come up with a class list of those characteristics. You may want to post that list so that students can refer to it.

Conclude your comparison by giving a lecture on the key characteristic differences between poetry and prose. Include also the historical and enduring importance of poetry to humanity. You may come up with your own list or refer to the notes listed below.

### *Notes on Poetry*

- Poetry is a different way of "saying" something
- Difficulty comes in the *nature* of what's said and the *content* of what's said
- Includes symbols, figurative language, etc. and other conventions that are unlike everyday speech
- Isn't written like a suspense novel or an informative brochure
- In spite of the difficulty, it is an ancient art form. Why?
- Its rhythm is natural to our senses (think of the rhythm of seasons, the ocean, our breath)
- Mankind is "form-making"; we create forms or patterns to understand the world better; rhythm facilitates this process
- Poetry is different from prose for two main reasons
- Economy (has the capacity to express a lot in few words)
- Lack of economy (defamiliarizes us from the everyday world; challenges us to see it with fresh eyes)
- Poetry brings a scene into focus

Depending on the age and skill level of your students, you may want to have them copy these notes in a bulleted format, or use this time to teach a mini-lesson on lecture note-taking skills. Give them guidelines (written on the board or transparency) then give the lecture while they write their own notes. Finally, check their work, by having a transparency of the key components of your lecture previously outlined and ready to display. Have the students check their work against your notes. You may want to have a brief discussion about the information that you or they chose to omit.

## Week Six: Culminating Assessment

For your culminating assessment, you need copies of both Culminating Assessment supplements, construction



paper, glue, other art materials, copies of poems you have studied in this unit (for Part One) and supplemental poems (for Part Two). For Part Two, you may use the extra ones provided in the poem list or use some of your personal favorites. Here are the Culminating Assessment Rubrics:

### *Culminating Assessment: Part One*

Directions: Congratulations! You have completed a study of poetry. The following assignment will help me as your teacher see how much you've learned and will help you reinforce the skills that we have been practicing. Read and follow the following directions.

Step 1: Think about your own father or "father-figure". Choose a poem from the group

that we have studied over the past few weeks that reminds you of that person.

Step 2: In an essay that is at least one page, answer the following questions. Be sure to

reread your work so that there aren't careless mistakes.

- What is the title and who is the author of your poem?
- What is this poem about? (Use your skills to visualize and clarify to answer this question!) How do you know? (Go back to the text to prove your answer.)
- Describe the person whom you chose in Step 1.
- Describe the person who is remembered in the poem that you chose.
- Compare these two people. How are they alike, and how are they different?
- Now reread your work to make sure that it makes sense, there are no spelling mistakes and that there are no grammar mistakes.

Due Date: \_\_\_\_\_

### *Culminating Assessment: Part Two*

Directions: This is the second part of the major grade that you will receive based on the study that we have just completed. This is your *Notes* page. It will help you complete this project.

Step 1: Choose a poem from the group that you have been given.

Step 2: Read it out loud at least 2 times.

Step 3: As you read, *visualize* what the poem is about. Draw what you see below.

Step 4: Write the words or phrases that made you think of the picture(s) you drew in Step

3. Next to each word/phrase, write a few sentences that explain what about those words made you think about the image that you drew.

Step 5: *Clarify*-Choose two words or phrases that were confusing to you when you first read the poem, and briefly explain how you clarified for yourself what they meant.

(table 05.01.07.04 available in print form)

Step 6: *Connecting*: As you read this poem, choose something within it that lets you complete this phrase: This reminds me of... In a few additional sentences, explain your first sentence (Why does this line remind you of what you wrote? How did it do that?).

Step 7: Use the above information to complete a project that looks like what is described below.

Step 8: Choose one of the strategies and explain how it has helped you understand what you read better.

(chart 05.01.07.01 available in print form)

Use the rubric below to make sure that you meet all of the requirements. Remember that rubrics help teachers and students be on the same page as far as expectations are concerned.

(table 05.01.07.05 available in print form)

This phase of the unit is reserved for assessment and may take up to 2 weeks. Use your judgment for this decision and on how precisely you need to break up this assignment. For the purposes of writing this unit, I am breaking it up into parts.

- Part One: Students will choose from the list of poems that we have studied and write a brief essay on how the father remembered therein is like their own father or the father-figure in their life.
- Part Two: Students will analyze another poem that departs from our theme of "fatherhood." This departure and their resulting project will remove the familiarity of our theme. The goal is to be able to see if the strategies and studying that we have been doing truly allow students to translate their knowledge into other territory.

Other considerations for the success of this unit are as follows:

Have students keep all work for this unit in a Poetry Folder. To save money, you can use a sheet of construction paper folded over. If you decide that you want students to write their own poetry, you can staple notebook paper on the inside cover. That can serve as their writing space.

I have found that students must be continually reminded of what they are studying. Have you ever had a student ask (in the middle of a lesson!) "What class is this?" To combat this obliviousness, surround them with your subject. In other words, create a "poetry classroom", as one of my colleagues put it. Students can bring in favorite poems or lyrics that can be posted in a special place. Also, dedicate a wall to the unit's thematic content. It can say simply, "Fathers Are..." in big letters. As you progress through the unit, let students bring in words or clippings that remind them of their own fathers or the ones that you study in the poems you read. Perhaps you can purchase or create your own poetry corners with magnetic poetry. You can put the magnets on a corner of your blackboard or on big old plates that you can find at resale shops. If you are extra adventurous, you may want to hang evocative lines of poetry from the ceiling on sentence strips. That gives students something curriculum-related to gaze at in their less attentive moments.

## Bibliography

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"A Brief Overview of Confessional Poetry." Online. [www. poets.org/viewmedia.php /5650](http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/5650). July 9, 2005. Available. This site established by the American Academy of Poets is a quick, but thorough, read that provides links to important confessional poets and their work.

"A Brief Overview of Imagism." Online. [www. poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/5658](http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/5658). July 9, 2005. Available. Also set up by the American Academy of Poets, this site explains major tenets of this movement while also providing a sample poem with careful articulation as to how it fits the Imagist movement. There are also links to key poets and their poetry.

Beers, Kylene. *When Kids Can't Read What Teachers Can Do*. Heinemann: New Hampshire, 2003. A must-read for teachers who truly want to develop independent readers. This book is best used as a handbook, but its natural, narrative style makes it easy to read. The information about strategies and how to incorporate them into my teaching were inspired by this writer.

Brooks, and Warren. *Understanding Poetry*. Heinle and Heinle: United States, 1978. A fundamental resource for teachers, this fourth edition provides accessible and foundational information for understanding key aspects of poetry, so that you can pass that knowledge on to your students. It provides study questions and supplemental poems so that you can review key concepts.

Woolf, Virginia. *To the Lighthouse*. Harcourt: New York, 1955. This novel is not only classic, but is helpful in helping one get a sense of how fathers are remembered. It's by no means a "necessity" for a successful progression through this unit, but can be helpful to teachers as they prepare to deal with this thematic content.

Yezzi, David. "Confessional Poetry and the Artifice of Honesty." *The New Criterion* Online. June, 1998. This Internet resource is easy to read and provides not only

basics of confessional poetry, but also key links to other helpful sites to poets, poems and other movements in poetic expression.

## **Poem List for Teachers and Students (can be found easily online at [poemhunter.com](http://poemhunter.com) or [poets.org](http://poets.org))**

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These poems can be used as I have suggested in the body of the unit or rearranged to your tastes. The ones that you do not use for the first five weeks can be used for the Culminating Assessment.

"Daddy" by Sylvia Plath

"Do not go gentle into that good night" by Dylan Thomas

"Men at Forty" by Donald Justice

"My Father on His Shield" by Walt McDonald

"My Father's Hat" by Mark Irwin

"My Papa's Waltz" by Theodore Roethke

"Parents" by William Meredith

"The Idea of Ancestry" by Etheridge Knight

"The Gift" by Li-Young Lee

"Those Winter Sundays" by Robert Hayden

"Whose Mouth Do I Speak With" by Suzanne Rancourt

"Working Late" by Louis Simpson

"Yesterday" by W.S. Merwin

"my father moved through dooms of love" by E.E. Cummings

"The Cow" by Ogden Nash

"This is Just to Say" by William Carlos Williams

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