

14 SITUATION AND SETTING: WHAT HAPPENS? WHERE? WHEN?

Questions about the speaker (“Who” questions) in a poem almost always lead to questions of “Where?” “When?” and “Why?” Identifying the speaker is, in fact, usually part of a larger process of defining the entire imagined **situation** in a poem: What is happening? Where is it happening? Who is the speaker speaking to? Who else is present? Why is this event occurring? In order to understand the dialogue in Hardy’s “The Ruined Maid,” for example, we need to recognize that the friends are meeting after an extended period of separation, and that they meet in a town setting rather than the rural area in which they grew up together. We infer (from the opening lines) that the meeting is accidental, and that no other friends are present for the conversation. The poem’s whole “story” depends on their situation: after leading separate lives for a while they have some catching up to do. We don’t know what specific town, year, season, or time of day is involved because those details are not important to the poem’s effect. But crucial to the poem are the where and when questions that define the situation and relationship of the two speakers, and the answer to the why question—that the meeting is by chance—is important, too. In another poem we looked at in the previous chapter, Parker’s “A Certain Lady,” the specific moment and place are not important, but we do need to notice that the “lady” is talking to (or having an imaginary conversation with) her lover and that they are talking about a relationship of some duration.

*It is difficult / to get the news
from poems / yet men die
miserably every day / for lack
/ of what is found there.*

—WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS

Sometimes a *specific* time and place (**setting**) may be important. X. J. Kennedy’s “lady in skunk” sings her life story “in a prominent bar in Secaucus,” a working-class town in New Jersey, but on no particular occasion (“one day”). In Browning’s “Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister,” the setting (a monastery) adds to the irony because of the gross inappropriateness of such sentiments and attitudes in a supposedly holy place, just as the setting of Betjeman’s “In Westminster Abbey” (below, page 677) similarly helps us to judge the speaker’s ideas, attitudes, and self-conception.

The title of the following poem suggests that place may be important, and it is, although you may be surprised to discover exactly what exists at this address and what uses the speaker makes of it.

JAMES DICKEY

Cherrylog Road

- Off Highway 106
 At Cherrylog Road I entered
 The '34 Ford without wheels,
 Smothered in kudzu,
 5 With a seat pulled out to run
 Corn whiskey down from the hills,

 And then from the other side
 Crept into an Essex
 With a rumble seat of red leather
 10 And then out again, aboard
 A blue Chevrolet, releasing
 The rust from its other color,

 Reared up on three building blocks.
 None had the same body heat;
 15 I changed with them inward, toward
 The weedy heart of the junkyard,
 For I knew that Doris Holbrook
 Would escape from her father at noon

 And would come from the farm
 20 To seek parts owned by the sun
 Among the abandoned chassis,
 Sitting in each in turn
 As I did, leaning forward
 As in a wild stock-car race

 25 In the parking lot of the dead.
 Time after time, I climbed in
 And out the other side, like
 An envoy or movie star
 Met at the station by crickets.
 30 A radiator cap raised its head,

 Become a real toad or a kingsnake
 As I neared the hub of the yard,
 Passing through many states,
 Many lives, to reach
 35 Some grandmother's long Pierce-Arrow
 Sending platters of blindness forth

 From its nickel hubcaps
 And spilling its tender upholstery
 On sleepy roaches,
 40 The glass panel in between

Lady and colored driver
Not all the way broken out,

The back-seat phone
Still on its hook.

- 45 I got in as though to exclaim,
“Let us go to the orphan asylum,
John; I have some old toys
For children who say their prayers.”

- I popped with sweat as I thought
50 I heard Doris Holbrook scrape
Like a mouse in the southern-state sun
That was eating the paint in blisters
From a hundred car tops and hoods.
She was tapping like code,

- 55 Loosening the screws,
Carrying off headlights,
Sparkplugs, bumpers,
Cracked mirrors and gear-knobs,
Getting ready, already,
60 To go back with something to show

- Other than her lips’ new trembling
I would hold to me soon, soon,
Where I sat in the ripped back seat
Talking over the interphone,
65 Praying for Doris Holbrook
To come from her father’s farm

- And to get back there
With no trace of me on her face
To be seen by her red-haired father
70 Who would change, in the squalling barn,
Her back’s pale skin with a strop,
Then lay for me

- In a bootlegger’s roasting car
With a string-triggered 12-gauge shotgun
75 To blast the breath from the air.
Not cut by the jagged windshields,
Through the acres of wrecks she came
With a wrench in her hand,

- Through dust where the blacksnake dies
80 Of boredom, and the beetle knows
The compost has no more life.
Someone outside would have seen
The oldest car’s door inexplicably
Close from within:

- 85 I held her and held her and held her,
 Convoyed at terrific speed
 By the stalled, dreaming traffic around us,
 So the blacksnake, stiff
 With inaction, curved back
 90 Into life, and hunted the mouse
- With deadly overexcitement,
 The beetles reclaimed their field
 As we clung, glued together,
 With the hooks of the seat springs
 95 Working through to catch us red-handed
 Amidst the gray breathless batting
- That burst from the seat at our backs.
 We left by separate doors
 Into the changed, other bodies
 100 Of cars, she down Cherrylog Road
 And I to my motorcycle
 Parked like the soul of the junkyard
- Restored, a bicycle fleshed
 With power, and tore off
 105 Up Highway 106, continually
 Drunk on the wind in my mouth,
 Wringing the handlebar for speed,
 Wild to be wreckage forever.

1964

The *exact* location of the junkyard is not important (there is no Highway 106 near the real Cherrylog Road in North Georgia), but we do need to know that the setting is rural, that the time is summer and the summer is hot, and that moonshine whiskey is native to the area. Following the story is no problem once we have sorted out these few facts, and we are prepared to meet the cast of characters: Doris Holbrook, her red-haired father, and the speaker. About each we learn just enough to appreciate the sense of vitality, adventure, power, and disengagement that constitute the major effects of the poem.

The situation of lovemaking in a setting other than the junkyard would not produce the same effects, and the exotic sense of a forbidden meeting in this unlikely place helps to re-create the speaker's sense of the episode. For him, it is memorable (notice all the tiny details he recalls), powerful (notice his reaction when he gets back on his motorcycle), dreamlike (notice the sense of time standing still, especially in lines 85–89), and important (notice how the speaker perceives his environment as changed by their lovemaking, lines 88–91 and 98–100). The wealth of details about setting also helps us to raise other, related questions. Why does the speaker fantasize about being shot by the father (lines 72–75)? Why, in a poem so full of details, do we find out so little about what Doris Holbrook looks like and thinks about? What gives us the sense that this incident is a composite of episodes, an event that was repeated many times? What gives us the impression

that the events occurred long ago? What makes the speaker feel so powerful at the end? What does he mean when he talks of himself as being “wild to be wreckage forever”? All of the poem’s attention to the speaker’s reactions, reflections, and memories is intricately tied up with the particulars of setting. Making love in a junkyard is crucial to the speaker’s sense of both power and wreckage, and to him Doris is merely a matter of excitement, adventure, and pale skin, appreciated because she makes the world seem different and because she is willing to take risks and to suffer for meeting him like this. The more we probe the poem with questions about situation, the more likely we are to get a sense of the speaker and to catch the poem’s full effect.

The **plot** of “Cherrylog Road” is fairly easy to sort out, but its effect is more complex than the simple story suggests. The next poem we will look at is initially much more difficult to follow. Part of the difficulty is that the poem comes from an earlier age and its language and sentence structure are a bit unfamiliar, and part is that the action in the poem is so closely connected to what is being said. But its opening lines—addressed to someone who is resisting the speaker’s suggestions—disclose the situation, and gradually we figure out the scene: a man, trying to convince a woman that they should make love, uses a nearby flea for an unlikely example; it becomes part of his argument. And once we recognize the situation, we can readily follow (and be amused by) the speaker’s witty, intricate, and specious argument.

JOHN DONNE

The Flea

- Mark but this flea, and mark in this¹
 How little that which thou deny’st me is;
 It sucked me first, and now sucks thee,
 And in this flea our two bloods mingled be;
 5 Thou know’st that this cannot be said
 A sin, nor shame, nor loss of maidenhead.
 Yet this enjoys before it woo,
 And pampered² swells with one blood made of two,
 And this, alas, is more than we would do.³
 10 Oh stay,⁴ three lives in one flea spare,
 Where we almost, yea more than, married are.
 This flea is you and I, and this
 Our marriage bed, and marriage temple is;
 Though parents grudge, and you, we’re met

1. Medieval preachers and rhetoricians asked their hearers to “mark” (look at) an object that illustrated a moral or philosophical lesson they wished to emphasize. 2. Fed luxuriously.

3. According to the medical theory of Donne’s era, conception involved the literal mingling of the lovers’ blood. 4. Desist.

- 15 And cloistered in these living walls of jet.
 Though use⁵ make you apt to kill me,
 Let not to that, self-murder added be,
 And sacrilege, three sins in killing three.
- Cruel and sudden, hast thou since
 20 Purpled thy nail in blood of innocence?
 Wherein could this flea guilty be,
 Except in that drop which it sucked from thee?
 Yet thou triumph'st, and say'st that thou
 Find'st not thyself, nor me, the weaker now;
- 25 'Tis true; then learn how false, fears be;
 Just so much honor, when thou yield'st to me,
 Will waste, as this flea's death took life from thee.

1633

The scene in “The Flea” develops, action occurs, even as the poem unfolds. Between stanzas 1 and 2, the woman makes a move to kill the flea (as stanza 2 opens, the speaker is trying to stop her), and between stanzas 2 and 3 she has squashed the flea with her fingernail. Once we make sense of what the speaker says, the action is just as clear from the words as if we had stage directions in the margin. All of the speaker’s verbal cleverness and all of his silly arguments follow from the situation, and in this poem (as in Browning’s “Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister”) we watch as if we were observing a scene in a play. The speaker is, in effect, giving a dramatic monologue for our benefit.

Neither time nor place is important to “The Flea,” except that we assume the speaker and his friend are in the same place and have the leisure for some playfulness. The situation could occur anywhere a man, a woman, and a flea could be together: indoors, outdoors, morning, evening, city, country, in a cottage or a castle, on a boat or in a bedroom. We know, from the date of publication, that Donne was writing about people of almost four centuries ago, but the conduct he describes might occur in any age. Only the habits of language (and perhaps the outmoded medical ideas) date the poem.

The two poems that follow have simpler plots, but in each case the heart of the poem is in the basic situation:

RITA DOVE

Daystar

She wanted a little room for thinking:
 but she saw diapers steaming on the line,
 a doll slumped behind the door.

5. Habit.

So she lugged a chair behind the garage
 5 to sit out the children's naps.

Sometimes there were things to watch—
 the pinched armor of a vanished cricket,
 a floating maple leaf. Other days
 she stared until she was assured
 10 when she closed her eyes
 she'd see only her own vivid blood.

She had an hour, at best, before Liza appeared
 pouting from the top of the stairs.
 And just *what* was mother doing
 15 out back with the field mice? Why,
 building a palace. Later
 that night when Thomas rolled over and
 lurched into her, she would open her eyes
 and think of the place that was hers
 20 for an hour—where
 she was nothing,
 pure nothing, in the middle of the day.

1986

LINDA PASTAN

To a Daughter Leaving Home

When I taught you
 at eight to ride
 a bicycle, loping along
 beside you
 5 as you wobbled away
 on two round wheels,
 my own mouth rounding
 in surprise when you pulled
 ahead down the curved
 10 path of the park,
 I kept waiting
 for the thud
 of your crash as I
 sprinted to catch up,
 15 while you grew
 smaller, more breakable
 with distance,
 pumping, pumping
 for your life, screaming
 20 with laughter,
 the hair flapping

behind you like a
handkerchief waving
goodbye.

1988

Both poems involve motherhood, but they take entirely different stances about it and have very different tones. The mother in Dove's "Daystar," overwhelmed by the demands of young children, needs a room of her own. All she can manage, however, is a brief hour of respite. The situation is virtually the whole story here. Nothing really happens except that daily events (washing diapers, picking up toys, looking at crickets and leaves, explaining the world to children, having sex) crowd her brief private hour and make it precious. Being "nothing" (lines 21 and 22) takes on great value in these circumstances, and the poem makes much of the setting: an isolated chair behind the garage. Setting in poems often means something much more specific about a particular culture or social history, but here time and place get their value from the circumstances of the situation for one frazzled mother.

The particulars of time and place in Pastan's "To a Daughter Leaving Home" are even less specific; the incident the poem describes happened a long time ago, and its vividness is a function of memory. The speaker here thinks back nostalgically to a moment when her daughter made an earlier (but briefer) departure. Though we learn very little about the speaker, at least directly, we may infer quite a bit about her—her affection for her daughter, the kind of mother she has been, her anxiety at the new departure that seems to reflect the earlier wobbly ride into the distance. The daughter is now, the poem implies, old enough to "leave" home in a full sense, but we do not know the specific reason or what the present circumstances are. Only the title tells us the situation, and (like "Daystar") the poem is all situation.

Some poems, however, depend heavily on historical specifics. In the preceding chapter, for example, we saw how Margaret Atwood based "Death of a Young Son by Drowning" on an actual person's journal entries. While the following poem refers to a particular event, it also draws on the parallels between that event and circumstances surrounding the poet and his immediate readers:

JOHN MILTON

On the Late Massacre in Piedmont

- Avenge, O Lord, thy slaughtered saints, whose bones
Lie scattered on the Alpine mountains cold;
Even them who kept thy truth so pure of old
When all our fathers worshiped stocks and stones,⁶
5 Forget not: in thy book record their groans
Who were thy sheep and in their ancient fold
Slain by the bloody Piemontese that rolled
Mother with infant down the rocks. Their moans

6. Idols of wood and stone.

The vales redoubled to the hills, and they
 10 To heaven. Their martyred blood and ashes sow
 O'er all th' Italian fields, where still doth sway
 The triple tyrant:⁷ that from these may grow
 A hundredfold, who having learnt thy way
 Early may fly the Babylonian woe.⁸

1655

The “slaughtered saints” were members of the Waldensians—a heretical sect that had long been settled in southern France and northern Italy (the Piedmont). Though a minority, the Waldensians were allowed freedom of worship until 1655, when their protection under the law was taken away and locals attacked them, killing large numbers. This poem, then, is not a private meditation, but rather a public statement about a well-known “news” event. To fully understand the poem and respond to it meaningfully, the reader must therefore be acquainted with its historical context, including the massacre itself and the significance it had for Milton and his English audience.

Milton wrote the poem shortly after the massacre became known in England, and implicit in its “meaning” is a parallel Milton’s readers would have perceived between events in the Piedmont and current English politics. Milton signals the analogy early on by calling the dead Piedmontese “saints,” the term then regularly used by English Protestants of the Puritan stamp to describe themselves and to thereby assert their belief that every individual Christian—not just those few “special” religious heroes singled out in the Catholic tradition—lived a heroic life. By identifying the Waldensians with the English Puritans—their beliefs were in some ways quite similar, and both were minorities in a larger political and cultural context—Milton was warning his fellow Puritans that, if the Stuart monarchy were reestablished, what had just happened to the Waldensians could happen to them as well. Indeed, following the Restoration in 1660, tight restrictions were placed on the Puritan “sects” under the new British monarchy. In lines 12 and 14, the poem alludes to dangers of religious rule by dominant groups by invoking standard images of Catholic power and persecution; the heir to the English throne (who succeeded to the throne as Charles II in 1660) was spending his exile in Catholic Europe and was, because of his sympathetic treatment of Catholic associates and friends, suspected of being a Catholic. Chauvinistic Englishmen, who promoted rivalries with Catholic powers like France, considered him a traitor.

Many poems, like this one, make use of historical occurrences and situations to create a widely evocative set of angers, sympathies, and conclusions. Sometimes a poet’s intention in recording a particular moment or event is to commemorate it or comment upon it. A poem written about a specific occasion is usually called an **occasional poem**, and such a poem is **referential**; that is, it *refers* to a certain historical time or event. Sometimes, it is hard to place ourselves fully enough in another time or place to imagine sympathetically what a particular historical moment would have been like, and even the best poetic efforts do not necessarily

7. The pope’s tiara featured three crowns.

8. In Milton’s day, Protestants often likened the Roman Church to Babylonian decadence, calling the church “the whore of Babylon,” and they read Revelation 17 and 18 as an allegory of its coming destruction.

transport us there. For such poems we need, at the least, specific historical information—plus a willingness on our part as readers to be transported by a name, a date, or a dramatic situation.

Time or place may, of course, be used much less specifically and still be important to a poem; frequently a poem's setting draws upon common notions of a particular time or place. Setting a poem in a garden, for example, or writing about apples almost inevitably reminds many readers of the Garden of Eden because it is part of the Western heritage of belief or knowledge. Even people who don't read at all or who lack Judeo-Christian religious commitments are likely to know about Eden, and a poet writing in our culture can count on that. An **allusion** is a reference to something outside the poem that carries a history of meaning and strong emotional associations. (For a longer account of allusion, see chapter 22.) For example, gardens may carry suggestions of innocence and order, or temptation and the Fall, or both, depending on how the poem handles the allusion. Well-known places from history or myth may be popularly associated with particular ideas or values or ways of life.

The place involved in a poem is its **spatial setting**, and the time is its **temporal setting**. The temporal setting may be a specific date or an era, a season of the year or a time of day. We tend, for example, to think of spring as a time of discovery and growth, and poems set in spring are likely to make use of that association; morning usually suggests discovery as well—beginnings, vitality, the world fresh and new—even to those of us who in reality take our waking slow. Temporal or spatial setting often influences our expectation of theme and tone, although a poet may surprise us by making something very different of what we had thought was familiar. Setting is often an important factor in creating the mood in poems just as in stories, plays, or films. Often the details of setting have a lot to do with the way we ultimately respond to the poem's subject or theme, as in this poem:

SYLVIA PLATH

Point Shirley

- From Water-Tower Hill to the brick prison
 The shingle booms, bickering under
 The sea's collapse.
 Snowcakes break and welter. This year
 5 The gritted wave leaps
 The seawall and drops onto a bier
 Of quahog chips,⁹
 Leaving a salty mash of ice to whiten
 In my grandmother's sand yard. She is dead,
 10 Whose laundry snapped and froze here, who
 Kept house against
 What the sluttish, rutted sea could do.

9. Chips from quahog clamshells, common on the New England coast.

- Squall waves once danced
 Ship timbers in through the cellar window;
 15 A thresh-tailed, lanced
 Shark littered in the geranium bed—
- Such collusion of mulish elements
 She wore her broom straws to the nub.
 Twenty years out
 20 Of her hand; the house still hugs in each drab
 Stucco socket
 The purple egg-stones: from Great Head's knob
 To the filled-in Gut
 The sea in its cold gizzard ground those rounds.
- 25 Nobody wintering now behind
 The planked-up windows where she set
 Her wheat loaves
 And apple cakes to cool. What is it
 Survives, grieves
 30 So, over this battered, obstinate spit
 Of gravel? The waves'
 Spewed relics clicker masses in the wind,
- Gray waves the stub-necked eiders ride.
 A labor of love, and that labor lost.
- 35 Steadily the sea
 Eats at Point Shirley. She died blessed,
 And I come by
 Bones, bones only, pawed and tossed,
 A dog-faced sea.
- 40 The sun sinks under Boston, bloody red.
- I would get from these dry-papped stones
 The milk your love instilled in them.
 The black ducks dive.
 And though your graciousness might stream,
 45 And I contrive,
 Grandmother, stones are nothing of home
 To that spumiest dove.
 Against both bar and tower the black sea runs.

1960

One does not have to know the New England coast by personal experience to find it vividly re-created in Plath's poem. A reader who knows that coast or another like it may have an advantage in being able to respond more quickly to the poem's precise description, but the poem does not depend on the reader's having such knowledge. The exact location of Point Shirley, near Boston, is not especially important, but visualization of the setting is. Crucial to the poem's tone and mood is the sense of the sea as aggressor, a force powerful enough to change the contours

of the coast and invade the privacy of yards and homes. The energy, relentlessness, and impersonality of the sea met their match, though only temporarily, in the speaker's grandmother, who "[k]ept house against / What the sluttish, rutted sea could do" (lines 11–12). The grandmother *belonged* in this setting, and it seemed hers, but twenty years of her absence (since her death) now begin to show. Still, the marks of her obstinacy and love remain, although ultimately they are doomed by the sea's more enduring power.

Details—and how they are amassed—matter here rather than historic particulars of time and place. The grays and whites and drab colors of the sea and its leavings provide both a visual sense of the scene and the mood for the poem. The stubbornness that the speaker admired in the grandmother seems a part of that tenacious grayness. Nothing happens rapidly here; things wear down. Even the “bloody red” (line 40) of the sun's setting—an ominous sign that adds a vivid fright to the dullness rather than brightening it—makes promises that seem slow and doomed. The toughness of the boarded-up house is a monument to the grandmother's loving care and becomes a way for the speaker to touch her human spirit, but the poem finally emphasizes the relentless black sea, which runs against the landmarks and fortresses that had been identified with the setting in the very first line.

Queries about situation and setting begin as simple questions of identification, but frequently become more complex when we sort out all the implications. Often it takes only a moment to determine a poem's situation, but it may take much longer to discover all the implications of time and place, for their meanings may depend upon visual details, or upon actual historical occurrences, or upon habitual ways of thinking about certain times and places—or all three at once. As you read the following poem, notice how the setting—another shore—prepares us for the speaker's moods and ideas, and then watch how the movement of his mind is affected by what he sees.

MATTHEW ARNOLD



*Dover Beach*¹

- The sea is calm tonight.
 The tide is full, the moon lies fair
 Upon the straits; on the French coast the light
 Gleams and is gone; the cliffs of England stand,
 5 Glimmering and vast, out in the tranquil bay.
 Come to the window, sweet is the night-air!
 Only, from the long line of spray
 Where the sea meets the moon-blanch'd land,
 Listen! you hear the grating roar
 10 Of pebbles which the waves draw back, and fling,
 At their return, up the high strand,
 Begin, and cease, and then again begin,

1. At the narrowest point on the English Channel. The light on the French coast (lines 3–4) would be about twenty miles away.

With tremulous cadence slow, and bring
The eternal note of sadness in.

- 15 Sophocles long ago
Heard it on the Aegean, and it brought
Into his mind the turbid ebb and flow
Of human misery;² we
Find also in the sound a thought,
20 Hearing it by this distant northern sea.

The Sea of Faith
Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled.
But now I only hear

- 25 Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,
Retreating, to the breath
Of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear
And naked shingles³ of the world.

Ah, love, let us be true

- 30 To one another! for the world, which seems
To lie before us like a land of dreams,
So various, so beautiful, so new,
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;
35 And we are here as on a darkling plain
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
Where ignorant armies clash by night.

ca. 1851

Exactly what is the dramatic situation in “Dover Beach”? How soon are you aware that someone is being spoken to? How much do you learn about the person spoken to? How would you describe the speaker’s mood? What does the speaker’s mood have to do with time and place? Do any details of present time and place help to account for his tendency to talk repeatedly of the past and the future? How important is it to the poem’s total effect that the beach here involves an international border? What particulars of Dover Beach seem especially important to the poem’s themes? to its emotional effects?

Not all poems have an identifiable situation or setting, just as not all poems have a speaker who is entirely distinct from the author. Poems that simply present a series of thoughts and feelings directly, in a contemplative, meditative, or reflective way, may not set up any kind of action, plot, or situation at all, preferring to speak directly without the intermediary of a dramatic device. But most poems depend crucially upon a sense of place, a sense of time, and an understanding of human interaction in scenes that resemble the strategies of drama or film. And questions about these matters will often lead you to define not only the “facts” but also the feelings central to the design a poem has upon its readers.

2. In Sophocles’ *Antigone*, lines 637–46, the chorus compares the fate of the house of Oedipus to the waves of the sea. 3. Pebble-strewn beaches.

SITUATIONS

EMILY BRONTË

The Night-Wind

In summer's mellow midnight,
 A cloudless moon shone through
 Our open parlor window
 And rosetrees wet with dew.

- 5 I sat in silent musing,
 The soft wind waved my hair:
 It told me Heaven was glorious,
 And sleeping Earth was fair.

- I needed not its breathing
 10 To bring such thoughts to me,
 But still it whispered lowly,
 "How dark the woods will be!

- "The thick leaves in my murmur
 Are rustling like a dream,
 15 And all their myriad voices
 Instinct¹ with spirit seem."

- I said, "Go, gentle singer,
 Thy wooing voice is kind,
 But do not think its music
 20 Has power to reach my mind.

"Play with the scented flower,
 The young tree's supple bough,
 And leave my human feelings
 In their own course to flow."

- 25 The wanderer would not leave me;
 Its kiss grew warmer still—
 "O come," it sighed so sweetly,
 "I'll win thee 'gainst thy will.

- "Have we not been from childhood friends?
 30 Have I not loved thee long?
 As long as thou hast loved the night
 Whose silence wakes my song.

"And when thy heart is laid at rest
 Beneath the church-yard stone

1. Infused.

35 I shall have time enough to mourn
And thou to be alone.”

September 11, 1840

- What might it mean that the speaker feels tempted by the wind to go wandering in the darkness? What might she find there?

ANDREW MARVELL

To His Coy Mistress

Had we but world enough, and time,
This coyness,² lady, were no crime.
We would sit down, and think which way
To walk, and pass our long love's day.
5 Thou by the Indian Ganges' side
Shouldst rubies³ find: I by the tide
Of Humber would complain.⁴ I would
Love you ten years before the Flood,
And you should if you please refuse
10 Till the conversion of the Jews.⁵
My vegetable love⁶ should grow
Vaster than empires, and more slow;
An hundred years should go to praise
Thine eyes, and on thy forehead gaze;
15 Two hundred to adore each breast,
But thirty thousand to the rest.
An age at least to every part,
And the last age should show your heart.
For, lady, you deserve this state;⁷
20 Nor would I love at lower rate.
But at my back I always hear
Time's wingéd chariot hurrying near;
And yonder all before us lie
Deserts of vast eternity.
25 Thy beauty shall no more be found,
Nor, in thy marble vault, shall sound
My echoing song; then worms shall try

2. Hesitancy, modesty (not necessarily suggesting calculation).

3. Talismans that are supposed to preserve virginity.

4. Write love complaints, conventional songs lamenting the cruelty of love. *Humber*: a river and estuary in Marvell's hometown of Hull.

5. Which, according to popular Christian belief, will occur just before the end of the world.

6. Which is capable only of passive growth, not of consciousness. The "vegetable soul" is lower than the other two divisions of the soul, "animal" and "rational." 7. Dignity.

- That long preserved virginity,
 And your quaint honor turn to dust,
 30 And into ashes all my lust:
 The grave's a fine and private place,
 But none, I think, do there embrace.
 Now therefore, while the youthful hue
 Sits on thy skin like morning dew,⁸
 35 And while thy willing soul transpires⁹
 At every pore with instant fires,
 Now let us sport us while we may,
 And now, like am'rous birds of prey,
 Rather at once our time devour
 40 Than languish in his slow-chapped¹ pow'r.
 Let us roll all our strength and all
 Our sweetness up into one ball,
 And tear our pleasures with rough strife
 Thorough² the iron gates of life.
 45 Thus, though we cannot make our sun
 Stand still,³ yet we will make him run.⁴

1681

- Whom is the speaker trying to persuade in this poem? Is his argument persuasive?

MARILYN CHIN

Summer Love

- The black smoke rising means that I am cooking
 dried lotus, bay oysters scrambled with eggs.
 If this doesn't please you, too bad, it's all I have.
 I don't mind your staying for breakfast—but, please—do not linger;
 5 nothing worse in the morning than last night's love.
 Your belly is flat and your skin—milk in the moonlight.
 I notice your glimmer among a thousand tired eyes.
 When we dance closely, fog thickens, all distinctions falter.
 I let you touch me where I am most vulnerable,
 10 heart of the vulva, vulva of the heart.

8. The text reads "glew." "Lew" (warmth) has also been suggested as an emendation.

9. Breathes forth.

1. Slow-jawed. Chronos (Time), ruler of the world in early Greek myth, devoured all of his children except Zeus, who was hidden. Later, Zeus seized power (see line 46 and note 3). 2. Through.

3. To lengthen his night of love with Alcmena, Zeus made the sun stand still.

4. Each sex act was believed to shorten life by one day.

- Perhaps, I fear, there will not be another like you.
 Or you might walk away in the same face of the others—
 —blue with scorn and a troubled life.
 But, for now, let the summers be savored and the centuries be forgiven.
 15 Two lovers in a field of floss and iris—
 where nothing else matters but the dew and the light.

1994

- How does the language of this poem (and its title) echo the situation's sexuality, uncertainty, and hope?

VIRGINIA HAMILTON ADAIR

Peeling an Orange

- Between you and a bowl of oranges I lie nude
 Reading *The World's Illusion* through my tears.
 You reach across me hungry for global fruit,
 Your bare arm hard, furry and warm on my belly.
 5 Your fingers pry the skin of a navel orange
 Releasing tiny explosions of spicy oil.
 You place peeled disks of gold in a bizarre pattern
 On my white body. Rearranging, you bend and bite
 The disks to release further their eager scent.
 10 I say "Stop, you're tickling," my eyes still on the page.
 Aromas of groves arise. Through green leaves
 Glow the lofty snows. Through red lips
 Your white teeth close on a translucent segment.
 Your face over my face eclipses *The World's Illusion*.
 15 Pulp and juice pass into my mouth from your mouth.
 We laugh against each other's lips. I hold my book
 Behind your head, still reading, still weeping a little.
 You say "Read on, I'm just an illusion," rolling
 Over upon me soothingly, gently moving,
 20 Smiling greenly through long lashes. And soon
 I say "Don't stop. Don't disillusion me."
 Snows melt. The mountain silvers into many a stream.
 The oranges are golden worlds in a dark dream.

1996

- How does the suggestion of crying alter your perception of the situation in this poem?

TIMES

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

[Full many a glorious morning have I seen]

Full many a glorious morning have I seen
 Flatter the mountain-tops with sovereign eye,
 Kissing with golden face the meadows green,
 Gilding pale streams with heavenly alchymy;
 5 Anon permit the basest clouds to ride
 With ugly rack¹ on his celestial face,
 And from the forlorn world his visage hide,
 Stealing unseen to west with this disgrace:
 Even so my sun one early morn did shine,
 10 With all-triumphant splendor on my brow;
 But, out! alack! he was but one hour mine,
 The region cloud hath mask'd him from me now.
 Yet him for this my love no whit disdaineth;
 Suns of the world may stain when heaven's sun staineth.

1609

- What words and phrases mark the shifts of the clouds back and forth across the face of the sun in “Full many a glorious morning”? What distinction is Shakespeare making between “suns of the world” and “heaven’s sun”?

JOHN DONNE

The Good-Morrow

I wonder, by my troth, what thou and I
 Did, till we loved? were we not weaned till then?
 But sucked on country pleasures, childishly?
 Or snorted we in the Seven Sleepers’ den?²
 5 ’Twas so; but³ this, all pleasures fancies be.
 If ever any beauty I did see,
 Which I desired, and got,⁴ twas but a dream of thee.

1. Moss.

2. According to legend, seven Christian youths escaped Roman persecution by sleeping in a cave for 187 years. *Snorted*: snored. 3. Except for. 4. Sexually possessed.

- And now good-morrow to our waking souls,
 Which watch not one another out of fear;
 10 For love, all love of other sights controls,
 And makes one little room an everywhere.
 Let sea-discoverers to new worlds have gone,
 Let maps to other,⁵ worlds on worlds have shown,
 Let us possess one world, each hath one, and is one.
- 15 My face in thine eye, thine in mine appears,⁶
 And true plain hearts do in the faces rest;
 Where can we find two better hemispheres,
 Without sharp north, without declining west?
 Whatever dies was not mixed equally,⁷
- 20 If our two loves be one, or, thou and I
 Love so alike that none do slacken, none can die.

1633

- Like so many of Donne's poems, this one attempts to persuade. What is the situation of this poem? What does the speaker wish to demonstrate?

SYLVIA PLATH

*Morning Song*

- Love set you going like a fat gold watch.
 The midwife slapped your footsoles, and your bald cry
 Took its place among the elements.
- Our voices echo, magnifying your arrival. New statue.
 5 In a drafty museum, your nakedness
 Shadows our safety. We stand round blankly as walls.
- I'm no more your mother
 Than the cloud that distils a mirror to reflect its own slow
 Effacement at the wind's hand.
- 10 All night your moth-breath
 Flickers among the flat pink roses. I wake to listen:
 A far sea moves in my ear.
- One cry, and I stumble from bed, cow-heavy and floral
 In my Victorian nightgown.
- 15 Your mouth opens clean as a cat's. The window square

5. Other people. 6. That is, each is reflected in the other's eyes.

7. Perfectly mixed elements, according to scholastic philosophy, were stable and immortal.

Whitens and swallows its dull stars. And now you try
 Your handful of notes;
 The clear vowels rise like balloons.

1961

- How does this poem's language emphasize the distinctions between the speaker and her baby? How does the poem's setting in time—morning—affect its meaning?

BILLY COLLINS

Morning

Why do we bother with the rest of the day,
 the swale of the afternoon,
 the sudden dip into evening,
 then night with his notorious perfumes,
 5 his many-pointed stars?
 This is the best—
 throwing off the light covers,
 feet on the cold floor,
 and buzzing around the house on espresso—
 10 maybe a splash of water on the face,
 a palmful of vitamins—
 but mostly buzzing around the house on espresso,
 dictionary and atlas open on the rug,
 the typewriter waiting for the key of the head,
 15 a cello on the radio,
 and, if necessary, the windows—
 trees fifty, a hundred years old
 out there,
 heavy clouds on the way
 20 and the lawn steaming like a horse
 in the early morning.

1998

- What words and phrases help to color the reader's perceptions of the various times of day mentioned in this poem? Why is morning "the best" (line 6)?

JONATHAN SWIFT

A Description of the Morning

- Now hardly here and there a hackney-coach⁸
 Appearing, showed the ruddy morn's approach.
 Now Betty⁹ from her master's bed had flown,
 And softly stole to discompose her own.
- 5 The slip shod 'prentice from his master's door
 Had pared the dirt, and sprinkled round the floor.
 Now Moll had whirled her mop with dext'rous airs,
 Prepared to scrub the entry and the stairs.
 The youth with broomy stumps began to trace
- 10 The kennel-edge¹ where wheels had worn the place.
 The small-coal man² was heard with cadence deep,
 Till drowned in shriller notes of chimney-sweep:
 Duns³ at his lordship's gate began to meet;
 And brick-dust Moll had screamed through half the street.⁴
- 15 The turnkey now his flock returning sees,
 Duly let out a-nights to steal for fees.⁵
 The watchful bailiffs take their silent stands,⁶
 And schoolboys lag with satchels in their hands.

1709

- From the poem's brief descriptions of morning routines, what do we know about its various characters and the kind of community they inhabit? Could a similar poem be written today?

PLACES

JOHN BETJEMAN

*In Westminster Abbey*¹

Let me take this other glove off
 As the *vox humana*² swells,
 And the beauteous fields of Eden

8. Hired coach. *Hardly*: scarcely; that is, they are just beginning to appear.

9. A stock name for a servant girl. Moll (lines 7, 14) is a frequent lower-class nickname.

1. Edge of the gutter that ran down the middle of the street. *Trace*: To find old nails [Swift's note].

2. A seller of coal and charcoal. 3. Bill collectors.

4. Selling powdered brick that was used to clean knives.

5. Jailers collected fees from prisoners for their keep and often let them out at night so they could steal to pay expenses. 6. Looking for those on their "wanted" lists.

1. Gothic church in London in which English monarchs are crowned and many famous Englishmen are buried (see lines 5, 39–40). 2. Organ tones that resemble the human voice.

- Bask beneath the Abbey bells.
 5 Here, where England's statesmen lie,
 Listen to a lady's cry.
- Gracious Lord, oh bomb the Germans.
 Spare their women for Thy Sake,
 And if that is not too easy
 10 We will pardon Thy Mistake.
 But, gracious Lord, whate'er shall be,
 Don't let anyone bomb me.
- Keep our Empire undismembered
 Guide our Forces by Thy Hand,
 15 Gallant blacks from far Jamaica,
 Honduras and Togoland;
 Protect them Lord in all their fights,
 And, even more, protect the whites.
- Think of what our Nation stands for,
 20 Books from Boots³ and country lanes,
 Free speech, free passes, class distinction,
 Democracy and proper drains.
 Lord, put beneath Thy special care
 One-eighty-nine Cadogan Square.⁴
- 25 Although dear Lord I am a sinner,
 I have done no major crime;
 Now I'll come to Evening Service
 Whensoever I have the time.
 So, Lord, reserve for me a crown,⁵
 30 And do not let my shares go down.
- I will labor for Thy Kingdom,
 Help our lads to win the war,
 Send white feathers to the cowards⁶
 Join the Women's Army Corps,⁷
 35 Then wash the Steps around Thy Throne
 In the Eternal Safety Zone.
- Now I feel a little better,
 What a treat to hear Thy Word
 Where the bones of leading statesmen,
 40 Have so often been interred.
 And now, dear Lord, I cannot wait
 Because I have a luncheon date.

1940

3. A chain of British pharmacies.

4. Presumably where the speaker lives, in a fashionable section of central London.

5. Coin worth five shillings (but also an afterlife reward).

6. White feathers were sometimes given or sent to men not in uniform to suggest that they were cowards and should join the armed forces.

7. The speaker uses the old World War I name (Women's Army Auxiliary Corps) of the Auxiliary Territorial Service, an organization that performed domestic (and some foreign) defense duties.

- How do the setting in place—a historic church in London—and time—1940, during the German bombardment of Britain—affect the tone of “In Westminster Abbey”?

DEREK WALCOTT

Midsummer

- Certain things here⁸ are quietly American—
 that chain-link fence dividing the absent roars
 of the beach from the empty ball park, its holes
 muttering the word umpire instead of empire;
 5 the gray, metal light where an early pelican
 coasts, with its engine off, over the pink fire
 of a sea whose surface is as cold as Maine's.
 The light warms up the sides of white, eager Cessnas⁹
 parked at the airstrip under the freckling hills
 10 of St. Thomas. The sheds, the brown, functional hangar,
 are like those of the Occupation in the last war.
 The night left a rank smell under the casuarinas,
 the villas have fenced-off beaches where the natives walk,
 illegal immigrants from unlucky islands
 15 who envy the smallest polyp its right to work.
 Here the wetback crab and the mollusc are citizens,
 and the leaves have green cards. Bulldozers jerk
 and gouge out a hill, but we all know that the dust
 is industrial and must be suffered. Soon—
 20 the sea's corrugations are sheets of zinc
 soldered by the sun's steady acetylene. This
 drizzle that falls now is American rain,
 stitching stars in the sand. My own corpuscles
 are changing as fast. I fear what the migrant envies:
 25 the starry pattern they make—the flag on the post office—
 the quality of the dirt, the fealty changing under my foot.

1984

- What is “American” (line 22) about the images described in this poem? Why does the speaker say he fears “the starry pattern” made by the raindrops in the sand (line 25)?

THOM GUNN

A Map of the City

I stand upon a hill and see
A luminous country under me,
Through which at two the drunk must weave;
The transient's pause, the sailor's leave.

5 I notice, looking down the hill,
Arms braced upon a window sill;
And on the web of fire escapes
Move the potential, the grey shapes.

I hold the city here, complete:
 10 And every shape defined by light
 Is mine, or corresponds to mine,
 Some flickering or some steady shine.

This map is ground of my delight.
Between the limits, night by night,
15 I watch a malady's advance,
I recognize my love of chance.

By the recurrent lights I see
Endless potentiality,
The crowded, broken, and unfinished! 20 I would not have the risk diminished.

1954

- In what way does the speaker's view of a city at night constitute a "map"? How is this map "complete" (line 9)?

EARLE BIRNEY

Irapuato¹

For reasons any
brigadier could tell
this is a favorite nook for
massacre

Toltex by Mixtex Mixtex by Aztex
Aztex by Spanishtex Spanishtex by
Mexitex by Mexitex by Mexitex by Texaco²

1. A city in central Mexico, northwest of Mexico City.

2. The Toltec, Mixtec, and Aztec peoples lived in pre-Columbian Mexico.

So any farmer can see how the strawberries
 10 are the biggest and reddest
 in the whole damn continent
 but why
 when arranged under
 the market flies
 15 do they look like small clotting hearts?

1962

- What connects “Toltex” and “Texaco” in the speaker’s mind (lines 6–8)?

SUGGESTIONS FOR WRITING

1. Matthew Arnold’s “Dover Beach” is a meditation on history and human destiny derived from the poet’s close observation of the ebb and flow of the sea. Write an essay in which you examine the poem’s descriptive language and the way this creates a suitable setting for Arnold’s philosophical musings.
2. Certain seventeenth-century poets, such as John Donne and Andrew Marvell, have been called “metaphysical poets” for their ingenuity in using apparently far-fetched analogies to create apt and insightful comparisons, usually intended to persuade. What is the line of reasoning in Donne’s “The Flea” or Marvell’s “To His Coy Mistress”? Who is the intended audience for each poem? Write an essay in which you discuss the way that either or both of these poems uses situation as the basis for comparison and persuasion.
3. Choose any of the poems in this or the previous chapters and write an essay about the way a poet can use situation and setting to evoke a rich intermingling of language, subject, and feeling.