

English 30-1

Responses to four poems and one narrative prose passage Blending of critical and personal voices

* Note that these responses were *not* written in time-pressure settings.

#1

Topic: Threatening forces

Text: "I Hear an Army Charging Upon the Land" by James Joyce

I hear an army charging upon the land
And the thunder of horses plunging, foam about their
knees.
Arrogant, in black amour, behind them stand,
Disdaining the reins, with fluttering whips, the
charioteers.

They cry unto the night their battle-name:
I moan in sleep when I hear afar their whirling
laughter.
They cleave the gloom of dreams, a blinding flame,
Clanging, clanging upon the heart as upon an anvil.

They come shaking in triumph their long green hair:
They come out of the sea and run shouting by the
shore.
My heart, have you no wisdom thus to despair?
My love, my love, my love, why have you left me
alone?

"My love, my love, my love," cries out someone in James Joyce's "I Hear an Army Charging Upon the Land." Thrice-invoked love! No one can doubt that this speaker loves. But loves whom? We don't know. "My love" may be a someone, or "my love" may be a capacity, or "my love" may be an ether that ought to be but seems not to be in the world. Or is all or is none of these. We don't know, for the love is not named. Nor, for that matter, is the speaker. Nor is the terror that fills the senses. And it is this condition of the unnamed and the un-nameable, in concert with Joyce's acute and varied imagery, that invests this poem with much of its power to disturb.

Here is a work that touches the universal experience of dread, of knowing that catastrophe approaches with juggernaut force and the feeling of helplessness before it. All the more helpless because we know nothing of the nature of that catastrophe, its dimensions or intentions, its effects or defects. We don't even know its name. And if to name a thing is to have some power over it, then we have no power here. Joyce's apocalyptic picture includes no insignia. Whose army? How many soldiers? What is the battle-name they "cry unto the night"? What anticipated or achieved victory informs their hideous "whirling laughter"? Is it another army at which they shout and shake "in triumph" their "long green hair," or is it at "me alone"?

The ambiguity must be intended. Joyce must expect us to ask such questions, and likely calls correct any number of answers—answers popular and particular, cued by individual readers' own experiences of despair. Yet despite the poem's ambiguous proposition, it is decidedly fixed in its terms. This is a piece short on abstract diction, long on concrete words that invade the senses. We see hoof-stirred foam about horses' knees, black armor, reins, whips, charioteers. We see dreams cleft and flame that blinds. We see warriors with "long green hair," an image that both provokes nausea and suggests deep primal power. Here are soldiers emerging "out of the sea," as though the immortal unconscious were always their

dwelling and always their point of ambush. Kinetically, we feel "charging," "plunging," "fluttering," "whirling," "clanging," and "shaking." To say that this poem is moving is no figurative cliché. There's enough here to rattle us right out of sleep. But perhaps Joyce conveys the conditions of chaos and despair most strongly in appeals to the ear. His first and emphatic image is auditory: "I hear an army charging upon the land." Within that general clamor we hear the unsettling juxtaposition of hooves thundering and whips fluttering. We hear the triangulated balance of a battle-name cried out, far-off laughter mocking and dizzying, and the speaker's own moaning, which seems to take him by surprise, as though he were literally beside himself with fear. And under-girding this terrible fugue is the constant clanging of a hammer on an anvil heart and the counterpoint mania of barbarians shouting along the shoreline.

Joyce's emphasis on movement, and more on sound, over sight, is probably intentional too. For the heard and the seismic, like the indefinite threat that is the subject of the poem, are elusive, amorphous, fixed only in memory, and therefore scarcely fixed at all—unlike the seen, which can be apprehended, is calculable and, therefore to an extent controllable. What can be seen can be named. What is heard, what is felt under the feet, cannot be named. And again, to name something is to have some power over it. But the speaker and I can hardly see these horsemen. It is they who see "me alone" here without "my love." They are in charge.

And they are charging. They will soon overtake us. That much is certain. What is less certain is our response to the approaching trial, the speaker's and mine. Because Joyce plants for us another ambiguity, now in the final stanza, in the question "My heart, have you no wisdom thus to despair?" The word "thus," with its alternate meanings of "therefore" and "in this way," squints at two readings. The line may be read as a rhetorical question: *My heart, are you foolish, therefore, not to despair? Can't you tell that an army is bearing down on you? Haven't you the wit to be afraid?* On the other hand, the line may be read as a sincere question: *My heart, are you foolish for despairing in this way? Is there any value in being afraid, knowing that there is nothing you can do to forestall the end?* So posed, the question bespeaks a tone of resignation, even bravery, in the face of certain destruction.

Ah, but only if my love were here! Then I could meet my end not just bravely but happily. Is this, in the end, what constitutes real despair for Joyce? Does he imply finally that it is not the threatening force itself that is cause for despair, but the sad knowledge that we are too often alone in it? The question invites an unexpected interpretation of the poem broadly. We may say that this is, in a real sense, a love poem—a poem that asks us to meet the terrors of living by loving.

#2

Topic: Unpredictability

Text: "The Layers" by 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.

They say you can't step in the same river twice. Nonsense. Of course you can. You can travel as often as you want—every day, if you choose—from your house to the river, the river that's gone for hundreds of years by the same name. You can stroll down the same good ol' road you've always gone. There are some alternate roads you *could* go, but you're used to the good ol' road and you like it. And you can scurry down to your favorite stepping-off spot at the river's edge, there where every spring the poplar leaves are heart-achingly green, the air ambrosially sweet, and the river's song is as steadily tuneful as ever it was. Wasn't it always this way?

No. It was never this way. Not even once. The river has been flowing and flowing for who knows how long, but the water is continually renewing. It's never exactly the same water. Its level rises and falls. As the seconds and centuries wear on, the banks wear away and grow farther from each other. New and motley debris, natural and unnatural, is cast in and fished out, upstream and down. The patterns of ripples and eddyings and gushings are in constant flux. And from here in this spot where you always stand at the river's edge—though in truth you've never stood in this very spot before—you can see the light as it changes from season to season, day to day, hour to hour touching the infinity of seeable other spots in infinities of ways. This place you know so well is utterly foreign. And always will be.

So with us. Both individually and in our relationships to each other. Taken together we are numberless rivers flowing side by side, into and out of each other, at varying depths and rates, with different objects bobbing along on our currents or anchored in our mud bottoms, beginning our tricklings at our own unknowable sources and emptying out into our own greater bodies of water.

That's my metaphor and I'm sticking to it. As for Stanley Kunitz, well, his metaphor's different. But it's used to much the same end, for it also stresses the variability and unpredictability of human experience, especially in terms of the individual as he knows himself in isolation and in relation to others. In his poem "The Layers" Kunitz isn't coursing down a river of life but journeying on dry land. On his way

he passes "through many lives, / some of them [his] own." The image and idea makes for an arresting opening in that it sees the speaker as separable from his own self, and that self a *set* of selves rather than a single irreducible entity. Nevertheless, like the river that is singular and constant in nothing but its name, the speaker feels that, in spite of his self being a thing of bits, "some principle of being / abides." That's to say there's something about him that stands a constant, a kind of movable landmark that allows him to feel at home in whatever foreign land his journeying takes him to. And this is a speaker who really needs to feel at home, at ease, at peace. This is because his journeying is like graceless, stuttered movement through what seems a kind of wasteland. A less than pleasant place. Here, behind and before on his road, the "milestones [dwindle] / toward the horizon," the verb and the image smacking of enervation and goal-less trudging. Here "slow fires trailing / from the abandoned camp-sites" speak of loss. There are angels here, but they read like vultures, scavengers on "heavy wings." In this place the only movement that seems to occur with any vitality is that of the windblown dust of dead friends, "those who fell along the way." But even this dust is described in its movement as "manic," erratic and dangerous, and it "bitterly stings" the speaker's face.

This isn't a warm, cheerful picture of a blissful traveler going an easy road. Some will say he has good reason to stop and drop, somewhere between one of those milestones ahead and an abandoned camp-site behind, and join the "manic dust." But that isn't how he's affected by the things he stands in relation to. And that isn't the choice he makes. Rather, quite unexpectedly, he exults ("somewhat," at least) and goes forward, his "will intact." This will is the abiding principle he has referred to in the opening lines, that from which he "[struggles] / not to stray." Will is the power that moves him onward through "darkest night" and mere "wreckage" and perhaps prompts him to hear an unidentifiable voice—for all *we* know and *he*, the collective voice of the "manic dust"—that says there's more to your landscape than what you see, standing here in this spot. And there's more to your own self than you seem to be, standing here in this spot. You are constantly changing, growing, renewing, revising. Who you were is not who you are, and who you will be is in the making. The things that once mattered to you, your "true affections," now are scattered and no longer matter. You've found and formed new affections, and you'll go the same process again and again. Old friends have become dust on the wind. But these aren't losses, these scatterings and castings off. They're simply transformations. They're change. And change is the only thing that stays the same.

#3

Topic: Risks

Text: Excerpt from *Lives of the Saints* by Nino Ricci

The narrator and his mother are preparing to leave their village of Valle del Sole, in the Italian Apennines, for Halifax. The year is 1960.

America. How many dreams and fears and contradictions were tied up in that single word, a word which conjured up a world, like a name uttered at the dawn of creation, even while it broke another, the one of village and hope and family. In Valle del Sole the men had long been migrants, to the north, to Buenos Aires, to New York, every year weighing their options, whether the drought would ruin the year's crops, or a patch of land bring a sufficient price to buy a passage, whether to strike out for Torino or Switzerland, with the promise at least of a yearly return, or to reckon on an absence of years or a lifetime, and cross the sea.

Tales of America had been filtering into Valle del Sole for many years already. But no one went to New York or Buenos Aires now, or to Abyssinia; they went instead to a place called the Sun Parlor. Before the war two men from our region, Salvatore Mancini of Valle del Sole and Umberto Longo of Castilucci, had smuggled themselves across the ocean and settled there—and it was the first time in history, people said, that a man from Valle del Sole and one from Castilucci had been able to work together without slitting each other's throats—and now, one by one, their relatives had begun to join them, every year the tide increasing. The Sun Parlor was in a new part of America called Canada, which some said was a vast cold place with rickety wooden houses and great expanses of bush and snow, others a land of flat green fields that stretched for miles and of lakes as wide as the sea, an unfallen world without mountains or rocky earth.

But for the many of us who had never been much beyond the small world circumscribed by the ring of mountains that cut off Valle del Sole's horizon in each direction, who had never passed out of hearing range of the village church bells, America was still all one, New York and Buenos Aires and the Sun Parlor all part of some vast village where slums and tall buildings and motor cars mingled with forests and green fields and great lakes, as if all the wide world were no larger than Valle del Sole itself and the hollow of stony mountains that cradled it. And for all the stories of America that had been filtering into the village for a hundred years now from those who had returned, stories of sooty factories and back-breaking work and poor wages and tiny bug-infested shacks, America had remained a mythical place, as if there were two Americas, one which continued merely the mundane life which the peasants accepted as their lot, their fate, the daily grind of toil without respite, the other more a state of mind than a place, a paradise that shimmered just beneath the surface of the seen, one which even those who had been there, working their long hours, shoring up their meager earnings, had never entered into, though it had loomed around them always as a possibility. And these two natures coexisted together without contradictions, just as goats were at once common animals and yet the locus of strange spirits, just as *la strega*¹ of Belmonte was both a decrepit old woman and a witch, a sorceress. When occasionally, now, a young man returned from overseas to choose a bride, the young women of the village primped and preened themselves, made potions, promenaded daily through the square, caught up in a dream of freedom, their every second word then a wistful "Ah-merr-ica." But when the young man had chosen, those left behind said "Tutt' lu mond' e paes," life was the same all over the world, sorry now for the one who had to leave behind the familiar comfort of family and village for an uncertain destiny across the sea.

¹ *la strega*—the witch

² *Tutt' lu mond' e paes*—Life is the same all over the world

What's typical on the brink of the unknown?

Nothing, of course. Nothing is usual here on the precipice. No route to the valley has the same ambush edges or sure-set footholds, the same shifting mixtures of gravel. No landing below has predictably placed its receiving pools or poisoned swamps. You'll fall. That much is certain. But if it's on shark-tooth rocks or into cool mosses is anyone's guess. The trip is navigable, but barely. Negotiable only on its terms, but negotiable still . . .

Still standing?

Still.

What's typical on the brink?

Everything, certainly. Everything is as it always was. Everyone's gone this way before. Has looked out from the point of the impulse to jump. Has looked down and felt the same heart warm to the same frozen moment. Felt the same acid creature clamber up into the throat and perch there, gloating. And everyone's never been happier at the prospect . . .

Expect the worst, my dear. Hope for the best. And step over the edge without a second thought.

This is the moment as new as needlepoints. As known as old shoes.

And this is something like the moment Ricci's character-narrator speaks of in the excerpt from *Lives of the Saints*. To depict the residents' ambivalent feelings here in the lonely valley, he seizes initially on a series of juxtapositions, expresses them in richly simple details and syntactical gymnastics, then fuses the polarities, and in the end has lyrically said that life is nothing if not constant and contradictory—at once this and that and "the same all over the world."

The passage opens with a single name: "America." "Ah-merr-ica"—"like a name uttered at the dawn of creation," heavy and incantatory, to suggest a unity of impression. But that would-be unity is fragmented in the following sentence when the narrator notes flatly that the world the word refers to is ambiguously built—a place and a sound that provokes fear and desire—that "[conjures] up [one] world" while it "[breaks] another." And based on what the word more strongly provokes, fear or desire, a choice is made. People "[weigh] their options." They choose to remain inert or to set forth for the promised land. By this, Ricci implies that change for the villager (and by extension for us) is no chance affair. It is volitional. One is not nudged. One steps. Now, the man who steps out, trembling or bold, from Valle del Sole chances Eden in a place called the Sun Parlor, a gloriously good land where even mortal enemies are reconciled to each other. It is a land of dreams, "a land of flat green fields that [stretch] for miles and of lakes as wide as the sea, an unfallen world without mountains or rocky earth." But the same man may forego the journey when he reckons the possibility that life in this "new part of America called Canada" will be no better than the one he has known at home, indeed might be worse—"a vast cold place with rickety wooden houses and great expanses of bush and snow." Some, it seems, would rather bear the ills they know.

Initially the narrator is detached, merely reporting events in Valle del Sole and hearsay from America, but eventually establishes his first-person credentials with the reference to "many of us." And we are prone to include ourselves in the phrase, to participate too in the fearing and desiring. And though he does not refer again to "us," we still sense the narrator's involvement, his teeming thoughts in sentences running on in assertions and qualifications that leave us fairly breathless and bewildered. And always the contrasts: America is the place that

[continues] merely the mundane life which the peasants [accept] as their lot, their fate, the daily grind of toil without respite,

and America is

a paradise that [shimmers] just beneath the surface of the seen, one which even those who [have] been there, working their long hours, shoring up their meager earnings, [have] never entered into, though it ... [looms] around them always as a possibility.

Both of these visions of America exist side-by-side in one sentence. The sentence after it, however, expresses the contradictory qualities of the "mythical place" not in opposing images set near each other but in images of opposition, and they are appropriately derived from the villagers' own myths: the goats, who are "at once common animals and yet the locus of strange spirits"; and "*la strega* of Belmonte," "both a decrepit old woman and a witch." These creatures, used to illustrate the idea that polar natures can "[coexist] together without contradiction," lead us to an important reading of the behavior of the young women "caught up in a dream of freedom." We can sense that they are not simply rationalizing ill-fortune, just spitting out sour grapes. They are doing so, in fact; but they also express intuitively (or at least serve the writer's irony) the truth that bliss and distress can coexist without contradiction.

"Tutt' lu mond' e paes." For all its suggestion of an open end, it is not an ambiguous resolution to the passage. In fact, it marks what is really the only sure conclusion that can be reached. Ricci's movement from juxtaposition to blending suggests that the paradoxical and constantly changing nature of life will always assert itself: Unalloyed Edens are never achieved, but neither are Hells wholly our lot. And no dilemma is safely approached, and no formula will serve. But if our expectations must admit the possibility of salvation or degradation or both at once, let our bias, at least, fall to hope.

And here we are still on the mountain's brow. Still. We attempt to gauge our chances of reaching the valley alive and well, knowing only that there is no knowing. We trust that when we get there the valley will give over milk and honey, but won't be surprised by hemlock and deadly nightshade.

Off we go.

And if we must fall, let's dive.

#4

Topic: Ruling passion

Text: "Tamer and Hawk" by Thom Gunn

I thought I was so tough,
But gentled at your hands,
Cannot be quick enough
To fly for you and show
That when I go I go
At your commands.

Even in flight above
I am no longer free:
You seeled¹ me with your love,
I am blind to other birds?
The habit of your words
Has hooded me.

As formerly, I wheel
I hover and I twist,
But only want the feel,
In my possessive thought,
Of catcher and of caught
Upon your wrist.

You but half civilize,
Taming me in this way.
Through having only eyes
For you I fear to lose,
I lose to keep, and choose
Tamer as prey.

¹seeled—to seel is to stitch closed the eyes of a hawk or falcon

At first reading, Thom Gunn's "Tamer and Hawk" seems to be about obsessive love. A man (presumably a man, for the poet is probably the better part of the speaker) considers the history of his love for another. He considers that initially his lover "gentled" him, brought him from an attitude of rugged independence to one of tenderness and made this now gentle man want to please his lover completely. But he does not feel equal to that task, "Cannot be quick enough" to "show / That when [he goes he goes] / At [his lover's] commands." He considers too that his devotion has become an obsession that occludes his focus on anything else. He has been made to feel comfortable when perched, "seeled" and "hooded," on his lover's arm. Now he finds that all he does for his lover is done with what seems a kind of heartlessness. For all his ostensible movement, he feels a kind of paralysis. None of his motion, the wheeling or hovering or twisting, is made now for the sake of the motion itself but for the lover whom, he feels, he cannot ultimately satisfy anyway. At this recognition, his thought takes a dark turn, and he considers finally that what he cannot please, he must destroy. His various acts of love will become a single act of attack. But Gunn's poem is probably larger than this reading suggests. "Tamer and Hawk" does not have to be a poem about a relationship between two lovers. It may be about one person—a person who stands figuratively for all people capable of noting their own idiosyncratic passions and the effects of those passions in their lives.

A second reading of the poem may suggest that its broader focus (from the bird's-eye point of view) is on the twining experiences of passion and control, human agencies that may stand both in harmony and at odds. Passion for something—a person, a spirit, an idea, an activity, an exclusive way of being—is a

decidedly human capacity, the source of limitless creative energy. It is a civilizing impulse because it gives us the feeling and the fuel we need to envision and build. But at the same time, passion is *passionate*. By nature *natural*, it is the animal in us. Passion is intuitive, wild emotion. It is unpredictable and rapacious. It is resistance to restraint. For this reason, partly, animals are not the builders of civilizations. Humans are. Humans have the ability to take their divergent animal energies and, godlike, turn them to convergence, to marshal their passions to the service of designing and building things ordered and durable. But what happens when passion marshals the passionate? Nothing ordered and durable will then be made, and we "but half civilize" ourselves, even as we "but half civilize" a passion. And in this case, two halves do not make a whole.

This understanding of the poem is achieved by an examination of various elements. Note for example Gunn's point of view, which is unexpected. It isn't that of the passionate person but of the passion itself, in this case animated in the persona of a hawk who experiences a progression, for he is shown to make a discovery about himself in relation to his keeper. His is the ruling voice of the poem, and the idea is that a passion has a life of its own. Cast in the spirit of a wild bird, that life is not (though for a moment it seems to be) subject to external control. Its first and last impulse is to act independently, uncontrollably. The hawk behaves subserviently for a time, appears "civilized." However, civility is only his context, which is tidily reflected in the poem's metrical regularity and steady rhyme scheme, its "habit of . . . words." Meanwhile, his subtext is bestial, as the final stanza, like a darkly ironic afterthought, implies. In fact, though, this stanza is no mere afterthought but the central thought without which the rest of the poem would seem meaningless. It is the conclusive moment when one with a passion, the would-be "tamer," knows that his or her passion may prove a devourer. Passion is "possessive." Passion will "fear to lose" and so must "lose to keep." Gunn's clever paradox, used to emphasize an ominous recognition in both the "catcher and . . . caught," is at once elegant and chilling.

Finally, Gunn's lyric seems to suggest that one's ruling passion can become one's ruler. We may read the idea that when a person becomes obsessed—devoted to one joy or one labor, to only one breed of fulfillment—such that all other passions, the "other birds," are made non-existent—he or she is living an unbalanced and ultimately self-destructive life.

#5

Topic: Hardship

Text: "The Mercy" by Philip Levine

The ship that took my mother to Ellis Island¹
Eighty-three years ago was named "The Mercy."
She remembers trying to eat a banana
without first peeling it and seeing her first orange
in the hands of a young Scot, a seaman
who gave her a bite and wiped her mouth for her
with a red bandana and taught her the word
"orange," saying it patiently over and over.
A long autumn voyage, the days darkening
with the black waters calming as night came on,
then nothing as far as her eyes could see and space
without limit rushing off to the corners
of creation. She prayed in Russian and Yiddish
to find her family in New York, prayers
unheard or misunderstood or perhaps ignored
by all the powers that swept the waves of darkness
before she woke, that kept "The Mercy" afloat
while smallpox raged among the passengers
and crew until the dead were buried at sea
with strange prayers in a tongue she could not fathom.

"The Mercy," I read on the yellowing pages of a book
I located in a windowless room of the library
on 42nd Street, sat thirty-one days
offshore in quarantine before the passengers
disembarked. There a story ends. Other ships
arrived, "Tancred" out of Glasgow, "The Neptune"
registered as Danish, "Umberto IV,"
the list goes on for pages, November gives
way to winter, the seas pounds this alien shore.
Italian miners from Piemonte dig
under towns in Western Pennsylvania
only to rediscover the same nightmare
they left at home. A nine-year-old girl travels
all night by train with one suitcase and an orange.
She learns that mercy is something you can eat
again and again while the juice spills over
your chin, you can wipe it away with the back
of your hands and you can never get enough.

¹ **Ellis Island**—a small island in Upper New York Bay where immigrants entered the United States (1892 – 1943)

"Suck it up, Buttercup!" I've heard this said and wondered if it's meant as mere deprecation, as dismissive abuse spat by the strong at the weak. Maybe it's supposed to be encouragement, however tart, lobbed into the ring by rough mentors to flagging fighters. Perhaps it's bitter commiseration that life-poisoned travelers sigh over their shoulders to those who've yet to arrive at the awareness that suffering's the best they can expect on the journey. That, or it may be oblique prayer, an odd uttering of celebration and petition somehow meant as much for the divine senders of suffering as for the mortal receivers: *Suck it up. Draw it fully in. Take it wholly to yourself. And thrive by it.* Shakespeare may have in mind something of the sort when his tattered, mad Lear cries out to the gods, "Pour on, I will endure!" Then again, the imperative "Suck it up" might be read in a different way altogether. That is, we might suppose the pronoun "it" doesn't actually refer to the suffering one endures. "It" may refer, rather, to the barely perceptible stuff that hangs on at the far edges of suffering—the soft touches and sweet tastes that you can also take wholly and holy to yourself, thriving by them too.

Whether Philip Levine's poem "The Mercy" is principally about thriving *on* or thriving *despite* the misery of the world is a question to leave for the moment. Still, it is a poem *about* misery—life's insoluble sadnesses, its thwarted hopes, its certain sufferings. And it's about mercy—the consolations, the nourishings, the suggestions of joy. And as it happens, joy is little more than suggested here. For Levine leans in detail and tone on the obviousness and constancy of hardship, in passages like "over and over," "long autumn voyage," and "the days darkening / with the black waters calming as night comes on, / then nothing as far as [the] eyes can see and space / without limit rushing off to the corners of creation." As well, hardship comes through in references to raging smallpox, burials at sea, a "windowless room," "the sea [pounding an] alien shore," and miners "[rediscovering] the same nightmare / they left at home." Where joy enters Levine's depiction at all, it comes only in muted references—once in the poem's opening, once in its closing—to the eating of an orange. Here is the understated counterpoint, or possible complement, to hardship. This is the sweet restorative, the goodness and mercy—not quite a cup running over, but withal enough to spill over your chin—that what? Makes hardship bearable? Or maybe makes it meaningful. After all (one trusts) there has to be something, some code-breaker that will render the gibberish of hardship comprehensible.

Certainly hardship is hard to comprehend, both in the happening of it and in the anticipation of its happening. Indeed, much of the hardship touched on in Levine's piece has to do with the anxiety that comes with not knowing what's to come, of not even knowing how to name the anxiety you feel. Consider the speaker's principal subject, his mother, unschooled in the basics of fruit, making a long sea voyage to some never-seen village called New York, absorbing foreign prayers over bodies to be absorbed by an

unfathomable sea, and floating thirty-one days offshore in quarantine before being allowed solid ground. And though the speaker punctuates his mother's episode with "There a story ends," her story of course would not have ended. Numberless other unknowns would surely have troubled her as she sought to make a home on "this alien shore." As well, her story is not truly over, for it is told again in brief in the image of a child traveling by night, by train, by herself, with but one suitcase to some un-named destination. But what the mother had, and the child has, to make endurable the unendurable is a simple, palpable blessing, an immediate knowable in the form of sweet taste and cool, overflowing moisture. In the mother's case, further, it is a blessing to which a kind stranger "over and over" gives a name: "orange." Who could ask for anything more?