

JUDITH ORTIZ COFER (b. 1952)

*Common Ground*

1987

Blood tells the story of your life  
in heartbeats as you live it;  
bones speak in the language  
of death, and flesh thins  
with age when up  
through your pores rises  
the stuff of your origin.

5

These days,  
when I look into the mirror I see  
my grandmother's stern lips  
speaking in parentheses at the corners  
of my mouth of pain and deprivation  
I have never known. I recognize  
my father's brows arching in disdain  
over the objects of my vanity, my mother's  
nervous hands smoothing lines  
just appearing on my skin,  
like arrows pointing downward  
to our common ground.

10

15

CONSIDERATIONS FOR CRITICAL THINKING AND WRITING

1. FIRST RESPONSE. How do you interpret the title? How did your idea of its meaning change as you read the poem?
2. What is the relationship between the first and second stanzas?
3. How does this poem make you feel? What is its tone? How do the diction and imagery create the tone?

COLETTE INEZ (b. 1931)

*Back When All Was Continuous Chuckles*

2004

*after a line by Anselm Hollo*

Doris and I were helpless on the Beeline Bus  
laughing at what was it? "What did the moron  
who killed his mother and father eat  
at the orphan's picnic?" "Crow?" Har-har.

*Anselm Hollo*: Finnish poet (b. 1934) who teaches creative writing in the United States.

The bus was grinding towards Hempstead, 5  
 past the cemetery whose stones Doris  
 and I found hilarious. Freaky ghouls and skeletons.  
 “What did the dead man say to the ghost?”  
 “I like the movie better than the book.”  
 Even “I don’t get it” was funny. 10  
 The war was on, rationing, sirens.  
 Silly billies, we poked each other’s arms  
 with balled fists, held hands and howled  
 at crabby ladies in funny hats, dusty feathers,  
 fake fruit. Doris’ mom wore this headgear 15  
 before she got the big C which no one said out loud.  
 In a shadowy room her skin seemed gray  
 as moon dust on Smith Street, as Doris’ house  
 where we tiptoed down the hall.  
 Sometimes we heard moans from the back room 20  
 and I helped wring out cloths while Doris  
 brought water in a glass held to her mother’s lips.  
 But soon we were flipping through joke books  
 and writhing on the floor, war news shut off  
 back when we pretended all was continuous chuckles, 25  
 and we rode the bus past Greenfield’s rise  
 where stones, trumpeting angels,  
 would bear names we later came to recognize.

#### CONSIDERATIONS FOR CRITICAL THINKING AND WRITING

1. **FIRST RESPONSE.** Compare the difference between the title and its slightly revised version as it appears in line 25. How does that difference reveal the theme?
2. At what point does the tone of the poem shift from chuckles to something else?
3. What is the effect of the rhymes in lines 26 and 28? How do the rhymes serve to reinforce the poem’s theme?

#### CONNECTION TO ANOTHER SELECTION

1. Discuss the tone of this poem and that of Gwendolyn Brooks’s “We Real Cool” (p. 827).

The next work is a *dramatic monologue*, a type of poem in which a character—the speaker—addresses a silent audience in such a way as to reveal unintentionally some aspect of his or her temperament or personality. What tone is created by Machan’s use of a persona?

KATHARYN HOWD MACHAN (B. 1952)

*Hazel Tells LaVerne*

1976

last night  
im cleanin out my  
howard johnsons ladies room  
when all of a sudden 5  
up pops this frog  
musta come from the sewer  
swimmin aroun an tryin ta  
climb up the sida the bowl  
so i goes ta flushm down 10  
but sohelpmegod he starts talkin  
bout a golden ball  
an how i can be a princess  
me a princess  
well my mouth drops 15  
all the way to the floor  
an he says  
kiss me just kiss me  
once on the nose  
well i screams 20  
ya little green pervert  
an i hitsm with my mop  
an has ta flush  
the toilet down three times  
me 25  
a princess

CONSIDERATIONS FOR CRITICAL THINKING AND WRITING

1. **FIRST RESPONSE.** What do you imagine the situation and setting are for this poem? Do you like this revision of the fairy tale "The Frog Prince"?
2. What creates the poem's humor? How does Hazel's use of language reveal her personality? Is her treatment of the frog consistent with her character?
3. Although it has no punctuation, this poem is easy to follow. How does the arrangement of the lines organize Hazel's speech for clarity and emphasis?
4. What is the theme? Is it conveyed through denotative or connotative language?
5. **CREATIVE RESPONSE.** Write what you think might be LaVerne's reply to Hazel. First, write LaVerne's response as a series of ordinary sentences, and then try editing and organizing them into poetic lines.

CONNECTION TO ANOTHER SELECTION

1. Although Robert Browning's "My Last Duchess" (p. 910) is a more complex poem than Machan's, both use dramatic monologues to reveal character. How are the strategies in each poem similar?

## A SAMPLE STUDENT RESPONSE

Georges 1

Alex Georges  
Professor Myerov  
English 200  
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Tone in Katharyn Howd Machan's "Hazel Tells LaVerne"

"Tone," Michael Meyer writes, "is the writer's attitude toward the subject, the mood created by all of the elements of the poem" (804) and is used to convey meaning and character. In her dramatic monologue, "Hazel Tells LaVerne," the poet Katharyn Howd Machan reveals through the persona of Hazel—a funny, tough-talking, no-nonsense cleaning lady—a satirical revision of "The Frog Prince" fairy tale. Hazel's attitude toward the possibility of a fairy-tale romance is evident in her response to the frog prince. She has no use for him or his offers "bout a golden ball / an how i can be a princess" (lines 11-12). If Hazel is viewed by the reader as a princess, it is clear from her words and tone that she is far from a traditional one.

Machan's word choice and humorous tone also reveal much about Hazel's personality and circumstances. Through the use of slang, alternate spellings, and the omission of punctuation, we learn a great deal about the character:

well i screams  
ya little green pervert  
an i hitsm with my mop  
an has ta flush  
the toilet down three times  
me  
a princess (19-25)

Listening to her speak, the reader understands that Hazel, a cleaner at Howard Johnson's, does not have an extensive education. She speaks in the colloquial, running words into one another and using phrases like "ya little green pervert" (20) and "i screams" (19). The lack of complete sentences,

Georges 2

capital letters, and punctuation adds to her informal tone. Hazel's speech defines her social status, brings out details of her personality, and gives the reader her view of herself. She is accustomed to the thankless daily grind of work and will not allow herself even a moment's fantasy of becoming a princess. It is a notion that she has to flush away—literally, has "ta flush . . . down three times." She tells LaVerne that the very idea of such fantasy is absurd to her, as she states in the final lines: "me / a princess" (24-25).

Georges 3

Works Cited

- Machan, Katharyn Howd. "Hazel Tells LaVerne." *The Bedford Introduction to Literature*. Ed. Michael Meyer. 9th ed. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2011. 807. Print.
- Meyer, Michael, ed. *The Bedford Introduction to Literature*. 9th ed. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2011. 804. Print.

MARTÍN ESPADA (B. 1957)

*Latin Night at the Pawnshop*

1987

Chelsea, Massachusetts  
 Christmas, 1987

The apparition of a salsa band  
 gleaming in the Liberty Loan  
 pawnshop window:

Golden trumpet,  
 silver trombone,  
 congas, maracas, tambourine,

ROBERT HERRICK (1591-1634)

*To the Virgins, to Make  
Much of Time*

1634

Gather ye rose-buds while ye may,  
Old Time is still a-flying;  
And this same flower that smiles today,  
Tomorrow will be dying.

The glorious lamp of heaven, the sun,  
The higher he's a-getting,  
The sooner will his race be run,  
And nearer he's to setting.

That age is best which is the first,  
When youth and blood are warmer;  
But being spent, the worse, and worst  
Times still succeed the former.

Then be not coy, but use your time,  
And while ye may, go marry;  
For having lost but once your prime,  
You may for ever tarry.



Courtesy of the National Portrait Gallery,  
London.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR CRITICAL THINKING AND WRITING

1. **FIRST RESPONSE.** Would there be any change in meaning if the title of this poem were "To Young Women, to Make Much of Time"? Do you think the poem can apply to young men, too?
2. What do the virgins have in common with the flowers (lines 1-4) and the course of the day (5-8)?
3. How does the speaker develop his argument? What will happen to the virgins if they don't "marry"? Paraphrase the poem.
4. What is the tone of the speaker's advice?

The next poem was also written in the seventeenth century, but it includes some words that have changed in usage and meaning over the past three hundred years. The title of Andrew Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress" requires some explanation. "Mistress" does not refer to a married man's illicit lover but to a woman who is loved and courted — a sweetheart. Marvell uses "coy" to describe a woman who is reserved and shy rather than coquettish or flirtatious. Often such shifts in meanings over time are explained in the notes that accompany reprintings of poems. You should keep in mind, however, that it is helpful to have a reasonably thick dictionary available when you are reading poetry. The most thorough is the *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)*, which provides histories of words. The *OED* is a multivolume leviathan, but there are other useful unabridged dictionaries and desk dictionaries.

 Explore contexts for Andrew Marvell and approaches to this poem at [bedfordstmartins.com/meyerlit](http://bedfordstmartins.com/meyerlit).

6. This poem is sometimes read as a vigorous but simple celebration of flesh. Is there more to the theme than that?

The third in this series of *carpe diem* poems is a twenty-first-century work. The language of Ann Lauinger's "Marvell Noir" is more immediately accessible than that of Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress"; an ordinary dictionary will quickly identify any words unfamiliar to a reader. But the title might require a dictionary of biography for the reference to Marvell, as well as a dictionary of allusions to provide a succinct description that explains the reference to film noir. An *allusion* is a brief cultural reference to a person, a place, a thing, an event, or an idea in history or literature. Allusive words, like connotative words, are both suggestive and economical; poets use allusions to conjure up biblical authority, scenes from Shakespeare's plays, historic figures, wars, great love stories, and anything else that might serve to deepen and enrich their own work. The title of "Marvell Noir" makes two allusions that an ordinary dictionary may not explain, because it alludes to Marvell's most famous poem, "To His Coy Mistress," and to dark crime films (*noir* is "black" in French) of the 1940s that were often filmed in black and white featuring tough-talking, cynical heroes such as Humphrey Bogart and hardened, cold women like Joan Crawford. Lauinger assumes that her reader will understand the allusions.

Allusions imply reading and cultural experiences shared by the poet and reader. Literate audiences once had more in common than they do today because more people had similar economic, social, and educational backgrounds. But a judicious use of specialized dictionaries, encyclopedias, and other reference tools can help you decipher allusions that grow out of this body of experience. As you read more, you'll be able to make connections based on your own experiences with literature. In a sense, allusions make available what other human beings have deemed worth remembering, and that is certainly an economical way of supplementing and enhancing your own experience.

Lauinger's version of the *carpe diem* theme follows. What strikes you as particularly modern about it?

ANN LAUINGER

*Marvell Noir*

2005

Sweetheart, if we had the time,  
A week in bed would be no crime.  
I'd light your Camels, pour your Jack;  
You'd do shiatsu on my back.  
When you got up to scramble eggs,  
I'd write a sonnet to your legs,

SHARON OLDS (B. 1942)

*Last Night*

1996

The next day, I am almost afraid.  
Love? It was more like dragonflies  
in the sun, 100 degrees at noon,  
the ends of their abdomens stuck together, I  
close my eyes when I remember. I hardly  
knew myself, like something twisting and  
twisting out of a chrysalis,  
enormous, without language, all  
head, all shut eyes, and the humming  
like madness, the way they writhe away,  
and do not leave, back, back,  
away, back. Did I know you? No kiss,  
no tenderness — more like killing, death-grip  
holding to life, genitals  
like violent hands clasped tight  
barely moving, more like being closed  
in a great jaw and eaten, and the screaming  
I groan to remember it, and when we started  
to die, then I refuse to remember,  
the way a drunkard forgets. After,  
you held my hands extremely hard as my  
body moved in shudders like the ferry when its  
axle is loosed past engagement, you kept me  
sealed exactly against you, our hairlines  
wet as the arc of a gateway after  
a cloudburst, you secured me in your arms till I slept —  
that was love, and we woke in the morning  
clasped, fragrant, buoyant, that was  
the morning after love.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR CRITICAL THINKING AND WRITING

1. **FIRST RESPONSE.** How is your response to this poem affected by the fact that the speaker is female? Explain why this is or isn't a *carpe diem* poem.
2. Comment on the descriptive passages of "Last Night." Which images seem especially vivid to you? How do they contribute to the poem's meaning?
3. Explain how the poem's tone changes from beginning to end.

CONNECTIONS TO OTHER SELECTIONS

1. How does the speaker's description of intimacy compare with Herrick's and Marvell's?
2. Compare the speaker's voice in Olds's poem with the voice you imagine for the coy mistress in Marvell's poem.