

Background The Italian poet Salvatore Quasimodo once wrote that “Poetry is the revelation of a feeling that the poet believes to be interior and personal which the reader recognizes as his own.” While you read the following poems, think about how each speaker feels about growing up. Perhaps you will relate to the feelings the poems express about approaching adulthood.



Poems About Growing Up

Identity Julio Noboa Polanco

Hard on the Gas Janet S. Wong

Julio Noboa Polanco (born 1949) grew up in the Bronx, a part of New York City. He now lives in Texas. Polanco wrote “Identity,” his best-known poem, when he was in the eighth grade. He had just broken up with his girlfriend, an event that marked a turning point in the young poet’s life. He continued to write poetry for many years until he decided to focus on writing essays and articles on educational and cultural issues.

Janet S. Wong (born 1962) decided to become a poet after working as a lawyer for several years. Many of Wong’s poems are about her experiences as an Asian American. Wong has said that a poem is a bit like shouting—since it’s impossible to yell for very long, “you have to decide what you really need to say, and say it quickly.”

- 1. READ ▶** As you read, collect and cite textual evidence.
 - Circle where flowers and weeds grow.
 - Underline what the speaker wants each time he says “I’d rather.”
 - In the margin next to stanzas 2, 5, and 6, write one or two words that describe the speaker.

Identity

Julio Noboa Polanco

Let them be as flowers,
always watered, fed, guarded, admired,
but harnessed to a pot of dirt.

- 5 I’d rather be a tall, ugly weed,
clinging on cliffs, like an eagle
wind-wavering above high, jagged rocks.

To have broken through the surface of stone
to live, to feel exposed to madness
of the vast, eternal sky.

- 10 To be swayed by the breezes of an ancient sea,
carrying my soul, my seed, beyond the mountains of time
or into the abyss of the bizarre.

- I’d rather be unseen, and if
then shunned by everyone
15 than to be a pleasant-smelling flower,
growing in clusters in the fertile valley
where they’re praised, handled, and plucked
by greedy, human hands.

- I’d rather smell of musty, green stench
20 than of sweet, fragrant lilac.
If I could stand alone, strong and free,
I’d rather be a tall, ugly weed.



2. **◀ REREAD** Reread the poem. What can you infer about what the flowers and the weed represent?



SHORT RESPONSE

Cite Text Evidence Why does the speaker want to be a weed? Review your reading notes and be sure to cite evidence from the text in your response.



1. **READ** ▶ As you read, collect and cite text evidence.

- Underline the two things the speaker compares in the first stanza.
- In the margin, explain what line 6 means.

Hard on the Gas

Janet S. Wong

My grandfather taught himself to drive
rough, the way he learned to live,

push the pedal, hard on the gas,
rush up to 50,

5 coast a bit,

rush, rest, rush, rest—

When you clutch the bar above your right shoulder
he shoots you a look that asks,

Who said the ride would be smooth?

2. **REREAD AND DISCUSS** ◀ Reread the poem. With a small group, discuss why the grandfather “shoots a look” at the speaker. Why does the speaker clutch the bar? Cite evidence from the poem in your discussion.

SHORT RESPONSE

Cite Text Evidence This poem is about more than the grandfather’s driving ability. Explain the message, or larger meaning, of the question “*Who said the ride would be smooth?*” Cite text evidence in your response.

Background Regarding the topic of work, English humorist Jerome K. Jerome once wrote, "I like work: it fascinates me. I can sit and look at it for hours." As a testament to our frequent desire to avoid work, inventor Thomas Edison stated, "We often miss opportunity because it's dressed in overalls and looks like work." However, most people would agree that work adds value to our lives, and when we push ourselves to fulfill a particularly difficult task, we gain insight into what we can truly achieve.

Poems About Work

To Be of Use Marge Piercy

A Story of How a Wall Stands. Simon J. Ortiz

Marge Piercy (b. 1936) was born into a family that struggled against the effects of the Great Depression. Her love of literature was instilled at a young age when she came down with rheumatic fever and was only able to read to entertain herself. The novels and poetry she writes frequently deal with the topics of feminism and social change. One of her most famous novels, *Women on the Edge of Time*, even incorporates elements of time travel.



Simon J. Ortiz (b. 1941) is one of the most influential and widely read American Indian writers. Ortiz was raised in Acoma Pueblo reservation as part of the Eagle Clan, where he spoke only his native language. When he was sent to boarding school, he was encouraged to speak English, and his struggle in transitioning between two different cultures led him to write about his experiences. Later, he would write as a means to bring attention to the American Indian voice, a voice he felt was unrepresented in American literature.



1. **READ** ▶ As you read "To Be of Use," cite text evidence.

- Underline metaphors in lines 1–11.
- In the margin, summarize the people the speaker admires.

To Be of Use

by Marge Piercy

The people I love the best
jump into work head first
without dallying in the shallows
and swim off with sure strokes almost out of sight.

- 5 They seem to become natives of that element,
the black sleek heads of seals
bouncing like half-submerged balls.

I love people who harness themselves, an ox to a heavy cart,
who pull like water buffalo, with massive patience,

- 10 who strain in the mud and the muck to move things forward,
who do what has to be done, again and again.

I want to be with people who submerge
in the task, who go into the fields to harvest
and work in a row and pass the bags along,

- 15 who are not parlor generals and field deserters
but move in a common rhythm
when the food must come in or the fire be put out.

The work of the world is common as mud.
Botched, it smears the hands, crumbles to dust.

- 20 But the thing worth doing well done
has a shape that satisfies, clean and evident.
Greek amphoras for wine or oil,
Hopi vases that held corn, are put in museums
but you know they were made to be used.
- 25 The pitcher cries for water to carry
and a person for work that is real.

2. **REREAD AND DISCUSS** ◀ Reread lines 18–26. In a small group, discuss what the author means by "The work of the world is common as mud." What idea does she emphasize by personifying the pitcher?

3. **READ** ▶ As you read “A Story of How a Wall Stands,” begin to collect and cite text evidence.
- In the margin, explain what the speaker of “To Be of Use” would most likely admire about the father in this poem.
 - Circle phrases that are repeated.

A Story of How a Wall Stands

by Simón J. Ortiz

My father, who works with stone,
says, “That’s just the part you see,
the stones which seem to be
just packed in on the outside,”

- 5 and with his hands puts the stone and mud
in place. “Underneath what looks like loose stone,
there is stone woven together.”
He ties one hand over the other,
fitting like the bones of his hands
10 and fingers. “That’s what is
holding it together.”

- “It is built that carefully,”
he says, “the mud mixed
to a certain texture,” patiently
15 “with the fingers,” worked
in the palm of his hand. “So that
placed between the stones, they hold
together for a long, long time.”

- He tells me those things,
20 the story of them worked
with his fingers, in the palm
of his hands, working the stone
and the mud until they become
the wall that stands a long, long time.

