

## The Letter<sup>1</sup>

Bad news arrives in her distinctive hand.  
The cancer has returned, this time  
to his brain<sup>2</sup>. Surgery impossible,  
treatment under way. Hair loss, bouts  
of sleeplessness and agitation at night,  
exhaustion during the day.<sup>3</sup>

I snap the blue leash onto the D-ring  
of the dog's collar, and we cross  
Route 4<sup>4</sup>, then cut through the hayfield  
to the pond road, where I let him run  
along with my morbidity<sup>5</sup>.

The trees have leafed out<sup>6</sup>—only just—  
and the air is misty with sap.  
So green, so brightly, richly succulent,  
this arbor over the road...  
Sunlight penetrates in golden drops<sup>7</sup>.

We come to the place where a neighbor  
is taking timber from his land.  
There's a smell of lacerated earth  
and pine<sup>8</sup>. Hardwood smells different.  
His truck is gone.

### POETRY EXPLICATION STRATEGY

1. As you read, look for unusual, distinct or clever phrasing of words or phrases. If a poet violates an expectation of language or presents an idea in an entirely new way, there is likely a reason that you can explore.
2. Look for powerful phrases that have an impact, because of meaning or sound quality. Look for metaphor, symbolism, sound devices.
3. Identify “cool” ideas that you can write about. In other words, if a poem references a historical event or philosophical ideal that you are familiar with, you certainly want to write about it.
4. Don't fixate on the things that you don't know; focus on the things that you do. In a poetry explication where you are only given ten minutes to read a poem, there is no way that you can expect to get everything. Emphasize your strengths and focus on those.
5. Weave in the use of poetic devices; don't force them in. You want to demonstrate knowledge of the devices and their application, but they are tools, not the focal point of your writing.
6. Don't write excessively about sound devices, meter, and rhythm unless you a) have little else to write about or b) are very good at it. They can be really powerful tools for analysis but are often over-used and trite observations.
7. Make sure that you do more than identify particular devices and techniques. Readers of the essays expect analysis of how the devices function in the piece.
8. You are proving a thesis in a poetry explication. Don't forget to write your paper with the central thesis in mind.

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<sup>1</sup> Why does the poet choose this as the title of the poem? Why is it the most significant element?

<sup>2</sup> How would you describe the tone of this line? What is it meant to suggest?

<sup>3</sup> Note the shift in syntax from complete sentences to fragments, perhaps suggesting an emotional disconnect or the reader's shock and pain at the news.

<sup>4</sup> Why does the poet choose to run? To leave the place of the letter?

<sup>5</sup> What is the purpose of this metaphor?

<sup>6</sup> Note the oddness of “leafed out.” While it's a clear symbol of life (in contrast with the news of death) why did the speaker choose this way to express her feelings?

<sup>7</sup> What might this be a reference to in the context of the news of the first stanza?

<sup>8</sup> What is this a reference to? What smells of fresh earth and pine?

Now you can see well up the slope,  
see ledges of rock and ferns breaking forth  
among the stumps and cast-aside limbs  
and branches<sup>9</sup>.

The place will heal<sup>10</sup> itself in time, first  
with weeds—goldenrod, cinquefoil, moth  
mullein—then blackberries, sapling  
pine, deciduous trees...But<sup>11</sup> for now  
the dog rolls, jovial, in the pungent  
disturbance of wood and earth<sup>12</sup>.

I summon him with a word, turn back,  
and we go the long way home.

--Jane Kenyon

#### **PATTERNS OF ORGANIZATION**

1. Organize by Natural Divisions of the Poem. (Stanzas (if they are present), divisions of poetic forms like sonnets, or natural cleavages (sub-themes))
2. Organize by literary device.
3. Organize by sub-thesis.

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<sup>9</sup> How does this image of nature differ from the “leafed out” trees of the earlier stanza? Why does it change?

<sup>10</sup> Why the reference to healing?

<sup>11</sup> Explain the purpose of this conjunction. The “But” is a hinge word. Explain why she chose this instead of “and.”

<sup>12</sup> Why does the poet return to this image? Why is the dog undisturbed by it?