

Read the next two selections and answer the questions that follow.

Sunday Morning Early

by David Romtvedt

My daughter and I paddle identical red kayaks
across the lake. Pulling hard, we slip easily
through the water. Far from either shore
it hits me that my daughter is a young woman,
5 and suddenly everything is a metaphor for how
short a time we are granted on earth:
the red boats on the blue-black water,
the russet and gold of late summer's sunburnt grasses,
the empty blue sky. We stop and listen to the stillness.
10 I say, "It's Sunday, and here we are
in the church of the out-of-doors."
Then I wish I'd had the sense to stay quiet.
That's the trick in life—learning to leave well enough alone.

Our boats drift north to where the chirring
15 of grasshoppers reaches us from the rocky hills.
A clap of thunder beyond those hills. How well sound
travels over water. I want to say just the right thing,
something stronger and truer than a lame *I love you*.
I want my daughter to know that, through her, I live
20 a life that was closed to me before. I paddle up
beside her, lean out from the boat, and touch
her hand. I start to speak, then stop.

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I Wish I Was a Poet

*from Like One of the Family
by Alice Childress*

- 1 Marge, I wish I was a poet. . . . Now that's no cause for you to stop stringing the beans and lookin' at me like you was struck by lightnin'. . . . No, I don't wish it on account of I want to be famous, but I do wish it because sometimes there are poetry things that I see and I'd like to tell people about them in a poetry way; only I don't know how, and when I tell it, it's just a plain flat story.
- 2 Well, for an instance, you know my cousin Thelma stopped in town for a few days, and she stayed at a downtown hotel. . . . Yes, I dropped by to see her last night. . . . Now, Marge, when I walked up to the desk to get her room number, all of a sudden the folks in the lobby cleared a path on both sides of me and I was about to get real salty about their attitude when I chanced to look behind me and saw two old people walkin' up to the desk. . . .
- 3 No, they were white, and you've never seen such a couple in your life—a man and his wife, and they must have been in their seventies. They were raggedy and kinda beat. The old lady wore men's shoes and trousers and an old battered raincoat and on her head a man's hat. From under the hat her white hair hung in curly wisps—and she was pretty. . . .



AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY—Alice Childress (1916–1994)

Alice Childress, the African American author of the short story “I Wish I Was a Poet,” was born in South Carolina but moved to Harlem when she was nine to live with her grandmother. She credits her grandmother, who had no formal education, with exposing her to a world of culture as well as instilling in her a love of storytelling and a sensitivity to class issues.

Dedicated to the art of storytelling, Childress explored a variety of methods in order to share ideas throughout her lifetime, including serving as a playwright, novelist, actor, director, and teacher.

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- 4 Yes, mam, she was pretty and still she was seventy and bent and dragged her feet along instead of liftin' them. The man was dressed just as sorry as her and in his hand he carried a paper bag. . . . Marge, he was lookin' at her like every woman on earth dreams of bein' looked at, and her eyes were doin' the same thing back at him.
- 5 Honey, everyone was standin', just starin'. There was a giggle from some kid and one well-dressed woman looked like she was goin' to faint, but the old man walked up to the clerk with the old lady follerin' behind him and he said in a quavery voice, "We'd like a room for the night."
- 6 Well, you could cut the silence with a knife. The clerk hemmed and hawed while they stood there lookin' back at him real innocent and peaceful, and finally he said, "You'll have to pay in advance." "How much is the cheapest room?" the old man asked. The clerk breathed a little easier and said: "Three-fifty." The old man went in his coat pocket and brought out four crumpled up dollar bills and put them on the desk.
- 7 The clerk turned red in the face and said real loud, "You can't have a room without carryin' baggage—where's your baggage?" You could hear a pin drop when the old man placed the paper bag on the desk, opened it and pulled out two rough dry shirts. . . . Well, with that the clerk took the money, gave him a key and fifty cents change and said, "Top floor rear!"
- 8 The couple smiled in such a dignified way, and it seemed like they hadn't noticed a thing. They started over toward the elevator and then the old lady turned away from the man and made her way over to the receptionist's desk. Everyone kept their eyes dead on her, and the receptionist, who was awfully young and pretty, was almost scared out of her wits. The old lady kept makin' straight for her, and I could see that the young lady was gonna scream any second. . . .
- 9 When the old woman reached the desk, she leaned over a bowl of red roses that was there and, ever so gently, breathed in the sweet smell, and then she turned away and quickly joined her husband at the elevator, and nobody moved until the doors closed and they were gone from sight. . . .
- 10 That's all, Marge. Of course, there was buzzin' and hummin' after that, but I got to wonderin' about who they were and where they came from . . . and did they have children . . . and how much work they both done in their lifetime . . . and what it must feel like to be old and draggin' around in the cold.
- 11 That's all there is to the story and it sure don't sound like much the way I tell it, but if I was a poet, I would sing a song of praise for the love in their eyes and I would make you see the sight of a lifetime when that ragged lady bent over those roses, and I would tell how awful it is to be old and broke in the midst of plenty. . . . And that's what I mean when I say—sometimes I wish I was a poet.