Ben Jonson (1573–1637)

Born in Westminster, England, Ben Jonson rose to become a well-known and respected playwright, England's poet laureate, and the author of many masques—that is, spectacles that included drama, poetry, and song performed to entertain the court. Jonson's satirical eye led him to create a brand of comedy that consisted of eccentric characters who represent various types of human temperament, as in *Every Man in His Humour* (1598). Though a scholar and a skilled lyrical poet, Jonson was a man of large appetites and volatile temper (he was nearly executed for killing a man in a duel). Among his most famous works are *Volpone* (1606), *The Alchemist* (1610)—both comedies written for the stage—and *The Forest* (1616), a collection of lyrics and epigrams.

AS YOU READ Note the opposition of the first word "Farewell" and the poem's title. How does this establish tone and serve notice that "joy" has been lost?

On My First Son

(1616)

Farewell, thou child of my right hand, and joy;
My sin was too much hope of thee, loved boy:
Seven years thou wert lent to me, and I thee pay,
Exacted by the fate, on the just day.
O could I lose all father now! for why
Will man lament the state he should envy,
To have soon 'scaped world's and flesh's rage,
And, if no other misery, yet age?
Rest in soft peace, and asked, say, "Here doth lie
Ben Jonson his best piece of poetry."
For whose sake henceforth all his vows be such
As what he loves may never like too much.

Writing from Reading

Summary

1 What is the situation revealed in the poem and the poet's attitude?

2 What does he mean by "why / Will man lament the state he should envy," and does the poet truly wish for death?

Analyze Craft

3 Notice the six rhyming couplets of this poem and the two couplets where the rhymes are less than exact. What is meant by "Ben Jonson his best piece of poetry"?

4 How old is the child to whom the father says farewell, and what does the poet wish for himself?

Analyze Voice

5 Technically, this poem is an elegy—a lament for a dear, dead child. What words and phrases establish that "lament," and what does the poet promise himself in the final two lines?

Synthesize Summary and Analysis

6 "Rest in soft peace" adds a word to "Rest in peace." Who does the poet imagine might ask his "soft" son to identify himself, and where, and when?

Interpret the Poem

7 If age is necessarily linked to misery, can the speaker find comfort in the fact that his son "soon 'scaped world's and flesh's rage"? What is the overall tone of the poem, and does "First Son" in the title suggest that there are or will be more?

Although we can say with confidence that Jonson is speaking from his own experience, this is not always necessarily the case. Poets—like novelists and playwrights—often imagine an experience, inventing both speakers and scene. Did Edgar Allan Poe, for instance, really hear a bird crying outside his home, as the speaker asserts in "The Raven" (see For Review and Further Study at the end of this section)? Did Robert Frost really find himself once, on a walk through the woods, facing two separate roads to choose from, as in "The Road Not Taken" (see Chapter 28)? Although it's quite possible these poems borrow, perhaps even heavily, from real life, we shouldn't automatically assume they are precise autobiographical accounts. Rather, we think of a poem's speaking voice as a potentially separate entity. This is called a persona, a poem's speaker that may or may not use the voice of the poet.

"One person, of course, can have 20,000 different kinds of voices."

Conversation with Marie Howe

One way to read a poem is, in effect, to measure the distance between the voice of the poet and the voice of the persona delivering the lines. In the dramatic monologue "My Last Duchess," for example (see Chapter 19), it's perfectly clear that the first-person pronoun of the speaker does not belong to the poet himself; Robert Browning was no duke. He is, in fact, unsympathetic to the man who's showing off his collection of art and arranging a new marriage, and he asks us as readers to notice things the character would deny. There's an absolute distance established between writer and speaker.

Sylvia Plath's poem "Daddy" is sometimes called autobiographical. Indeed, the poem is an angry and raw cry of resistance aimed at the poet's father, Otto Plath, who died when she was still a child. Haunted by three decades of grief and memories of her stern father, Plath fashions a poem that voices a bitter response to his lasting psychological grip.