

## Occasions for Writing

Important occasions in life offer opportunities to stop and reflect. These moments of reflection, in turn, can become powerful occasions for writing. Sometimes the occasions are happy, sometimes they are sad, sometimes they are deeply painful. Important occasions might include, but are not limited to, birthdays, anniversaries, firsts (first day of school, first kiss, First Communion, etc.), lasts, births, deaths, etc.

In the following three poems—one by Alice Walker and two by Lucille Clifton—the authors use celebratory occasions to reflect on people and experiences in really deep ways.

### **Poem at Thirty-Nine**

by Alice Walker

How I miss my father.  
I wish he had not been  
so tired  
when I was  
born.

Writing deposit slips and checks  
I think of him.  
He taught me how.  
This is the form,  
he must have said:  
the way it is done.  
I learned to see  
bits of paper  
as a way  
to escape  
the life he knew  
and even in high school  
had a savings  
account.

He taught me  
that telling the truth  
did not always mean  
a beating;  
though many of my truths  
must have grieved him  
before the end.

How I miss my father!  
He cooked like a person  
dancing  
in a yoga meditation  
and craved the voluptuous  
sharing  
of good food.

Now I look and cook just like him:  
my brain light;  
tossing this and that  
into the pot;  
seasoning none of my life  
the same way twice; happy to feed  
whoever strays my way.

He would have grown  
to admire  
the woman I've become:  
cooking, writing, chopping wood,  
staring into the fire.

**the thirty eighth year**

By Lucille Clifton

the thirty eighth year  
of my life,  
plain as bread  
round as a cake  
an ordinary woman

an ordinary woman

i had expected to be  
smaller than this,  
more beautiful,  
wiser in Afrikan ways,  
more confident,  
i had expected  
more than this.

i will be forty soon  
my mother once was forty

my mother died at forty four,  
a woman of sad countenance  
leaving behind a girl  
awkward as a stork.  
my mother was thick,  
her hair was a jungle and  
she was very wise  
and beautiful  
and sad.

i have dreamed dreams  
for you mama  
more than once.  
i have wrapped me  
in your skin  
and made you live again  
more than once.  
I have taken the bones you hardened  
and built daughters  
and they blossom and promise fruit  
like Afrikan trees.  
i am a woman now,  
an ordinary woman.

in the thirty eighth  
year of my life,  
surrounded by life,  
a perfect picture of  
blackness blessed,  
i had not expected this  
loneliness.

if it is western,  
if it is the final  
Europe in my mind,  
if in the middle of my life  
I am turning the final turn  
into the shining dark  
let me come to it whole  
and holy  
not afraid  
not lonely  
out of my mother's life  
into my own.  
into my own.

i had expected more than this.  
i had not expected to be  
an ordinary woman

**won't you celebrate with me**

By Lucille Clifton

won't you celebrate with me  
what i have shaped into  
a kind of life? i had no model.  
born in babylon  
both nonwhite and woman  
what did i see to be except myself?  
i made it up  
here on this bridge between  
starshine and clay,  
my one hand holding tight  
my other hand; come celebrate  
with me that everyday  
something has tried to kill me  
and has failed.

**Questions for Discussion:**

1. What themes and/or topics do the authors take up in their poems?
2. Why do you think each author chose an occasion to discuss the topics she discusses?

**Activity:**

**Make a list of important occasions in your life. Set a 15-minute timer and write a story or poem connected in some way to one of those occasions.**