Possible project topics:

These two pieces of writing help me to understand\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_:

1. How life imitates art and how art can also come to imitate life.
2. How truth can be hidden by lies and lies can come to be true.
3. How ideas can come to imprison the souls of those who create them.
4. How people chose to rule and control instead of compromise and coexist.
5. How symbolism can change text without changing meaning.

**Thou Art My Lute**

By [Paul Laurence Dunbar](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/paul-laurence-dunbar)

Thou art my lute, by thee I sing,—

     My being is attuned to thee.

Thou settest all my words a-wing,

     And meltest me to melody.

Thou art my life, by thee I live,

     From thee proceed the joys I know;

Sweetheart, thy hand has power to give

     The meed of love—the cup of woe.

Thou art my love, by thee I lead

     My soul the paths of light along,

From vale to vale, from mead to mead,

     And home it in the hills of song.

My song, my soul, my life, my all,

     Why need I pray or make my plea,

Since my petition cannot fall;

     For I’m already one with thee!

**Art**

By [Herman Melville](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/herman-melville)

In placid hours well-pleased we dream

Of many a brave unbodied scheme.

But form to lend, pulsed life create,

What unlike things must meet and mate:

A flame to melt—a wind to freeze;

Sad patience—joyous energies;

Humility—yet pride and scorn;

Instinct and study; love and hate;

Audacity—reverence. These must mate,

And fuse with Jacob’s mystic heart,

To wrestle with the angel—Art.

**One Art**

By [Elizabeth Bishop](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/elizabeth-bishop)

The art of losing isn’t hard to master;

so many things seem filled with the intent

to be lost that their loss is no disaster.

Lose something every day. Accept the fluster

of lost door keys, the hour badly spent.

The art of losing isn’t hard to master.

Then practice losing farther, losing faster:

places, and names, and where it was you meant

to travel. None of these will bring disaster.

I lost my mother’s watch. And look! my last, or

next-to-last, of three loved houses went.

The art of losing isn’t hard to master.

I lost two cities, lovely ones. And, vaster,

some realms I owned, two rivers, a continent.

I miss them, but it wasn’t a disaster.

—Even losing you (the joking voice, a gesture

I love) I shan’t have lied. It’s evident

the art of losing’s not too hard to master

though it may look like (*Write* it!) like disaster.

**The Lie**

By [Sir Walter Ralegh](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/sir-walter-ralegh)

Go, soul, the body’s guest,

Upon a thankless errand;

Fear not to touch the best;

The truth shall be thy warrant.

Go, since I needs must die,

And give the world the lie.

Say to the court, it glows

And shines like rotten wood;

Say to the church, it shows

What’s good, and doth no good.

If church and court reply,

Then give them both the lie.

Tell potentates, they live

Acting by others’ action;

Not loved unless they give,

Not strong but by a faction.

If potentates reply,

Give potentates the lie.

Tell men of high condition,

That manage the estate,

Their purpose is ambition,

Their practice only hate.

And if they once reply,

Then give them all the lie.

Tell them that brave it most,

They beg for more by spending,

Who, in their greatest cost,

Seek nothing but commending.

And if they make reply,

Then give them all the lie.

Tell zeal it wants devotion;

Tell love it is but lust;

Tell time it is but motion;

Tell flesh it is but dust.

And wish them not reply,

For thou must give the lie.

Tell age it daily wasteth;

Tell honor how it alters;

Tell beauty how she blasteth;

Tell favor how it falters.

And as they shall reply,

Give every one the lie.

Tell wit how much it wrangles

In tickle points of niceness;

Tell wisdom she entangles

Herself in overwiseness.

And when they do reply,

Straight give them both the lie.

Tell physic of her boldness;

Tell skill it is pretension;

Tell charity of coldness;

Tell law it is contention.

And as they do reply,

So give them still the lie.

Tell fortune of her blindness;

Tell nature of decay;

Tell friendship of unkindness;

Tell justice of delay.

And if they will reply,

Then give them all the lie.

Tell arts they have no soundness,

But vary by esteeming;

Tell schools they want profoundness,

And stand too much on seeming.

If arts and schools reply,

Give arts and schools the lie.

Tell faith it’s fled the city;

Tell how the country erreth;

Tell manhood shakes off pity;

Tell virtue least preferreth.

And if they do reply,

Spare not to give the lie.

So when thou hast, as I

Commanded thee, done blabbing—

Although to give the lie

Deserves no less than stabbing—

Stab at thee he that will,

No stab the soul can kill.

**Truth-Taking Stare**

By [David Wojahn](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/david-wojahn)

... in which generally the patient has the sense of having lost contact with things, or of everything having undergone a subtle but all-encompassing change, reality revealed as never before, though eerie in some ineffable way.   
—Louis Sass

Or gallery. Or strange askew museum. Or painting of a hotel bed

with some cheap print above the headboard. (Palm tree or a sleigh

pulling Xmas trees.) Or the day two-dimensional, subzero

as I run the beach along the frozen lake. The waves

lathed to Hokusai spirals. Cold gallery, every inch

of wall space covered, park benches derbied by snow.

House designed by Frank Lloyd Wright. House for battered women.

House of the servants of His Godhead Reverend Moon

Who plots in some Seoul penthouse His glorious

death and resurrection. Ten minutes ago I left you

to the laying on of hands. Maria talking fast in glottal

Polish, and the physical therapist, hugely blonde,

lifting your legs, white cocoons of the casts. First up,

then to the sides, the hospital bed in the living room

hulking, whirring as it moves along with you.

To talk of this and you directly, though I can’t.

To heal you with my own hands though I can’t.

Legs not working, hands not working, tongue encased in plaster.

The tongue going numb with the hands. Why my friend Dave

loves jazz: to hammer and obliterate the words,

nullify too the wordlessness. “Blue Train” on my Walkman

as the Moonies leave from house to van, lugging crates

of silken flowers. Blue pills that didn’t work.

Then my month of yellow pills. To not metamorphose

to my father writhing as the charges surge

from temples down the spine, a dog’s twitching legs

in sleep. To mollify with acronyms: ECT, Odysseuses

and Tristans of PDR, yellow Prozac, sky blue Zoloft.

To heal you with my own hands though I can’t.

The day two-dimensional. (Past and present and to dwell

in neither.) Truth-taking stare. Height and width,

no depth. On a screen the paramedics ease you

from car to ambulance, having labored with a crowbar

at the door, and I push again through the crowd

on Thorndale. *This is my husband. Please*

*let him come with me.* The inside of the ambulance,

overlit. Not a scream, the mute button pushed.

*Generally the patient has the sense ...* To watch

the memories shuffle on a screen. To Portugal ten years ago.

Our Lady of The Wordless Stare. The Bishop of Leiria

in sepia on the gallery wall, his hand that waves

a sealed envelope. Caption: “The Famous Third Secret of Fatima.”

The visitor’s center, thronging with white habits.

The road to the Basilica flanked by tourist booth, a wax museum.

Faces of two nuns who point to every photo, who’ve fled Cambodia,

one who speaks some English, and the beautiful younger one

whose tongue was “excised” by the Khymer Rouge—

on pilgrimage, thanksgiving for deliverance.

Their charter bus from Nice is parked outside,

pneumatic door and motor humming. Our Lady of the Wordless

stares at me. She stares .... And I’m shaken out of it

by helicopter stammer, drowning Coltrane,

all sixteenth notes as the Moonies reach the left of the frame.

Dissolve, myself, from the right of the frame. Synesthetic

whir of chopper blades, six hundred feet above the lake.

Then the picture empty. And the lake with wind anointed.

And the lake with wind. And the emptiness, anointed.

David Wojahn, “Truth-Taking Stare” from *The Falling Hour.* Copyright © 1997. All rights are controlled by the University of Pittsburgh Press, Pittsburgh, PA 15260. Used by permission of the University of Pittsburgh Press.

Source: *The Falling Hour* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 1997)

**Leap In The Dark**

By [Roberta Hill Whiteman](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/roberta-hill-whiteman)

“The experience of truth is indispensible   
for the experience of beauty and the sense   
of beauty is guided by a leap in the dark.”   
Arthur Koestler

**I.**

Stoplights edged the licorice street with ribbon,

neon embroidering wet sidewalks. She turned

into the driveway and leaped in the dark. A blackbird

perched on the bouncing twig of a maple, heard

her whisper, “Stranger, lover, the lost days are over.

While I walk from car to door, something inward opens

like four o’clocks in rain. Earth, cold from autumn,

pulls me. I can’t breathe the same

with dirt for marrow and mist for skin,

blurring my vision, my vision’s separate self.

I stand drunk in this glitter, under the sky’s grey shelter.

The city maple, not half so bitter, hurls itself

in two directions, until both tips darken and disappear,

as I darken my reflection in the smoking mirror

of my home. How faint the sound of dry leaves,

like the clattering keys of another morning, another world.”

**II.**

She looked out the window at some inward greying door.

The maple held her glance, made ground fog from her cigarette.

Beyond uneven stairs, children screamed,

gunned each other down. Then she sealed her nimble dreams

with water from a murky bay. “For him I map

this galaxy of dust that turns without an answer.

When it rains, I remember his face in the corridor

of a past apartment and trace the anguish around his mouth,

his wrinkled forehead, unguarded eyes, the foreign fruit

of an intricate sadness. With the grace that remains,

I catch a glint around a door I cannot enter.

The clock echoes in dishtowels; I search love’s center

and bang pans against the rubble of my day, the lucid

grandeur of wet ground, the strangeness of a fatal sun

that makes us mark on the margin of our loss,

trust in the gossamer of touch, trust in the late-plowed field.”

**III.**

When the sun opened clouds and walked into her mongrel soul,

she chopped celery into rocky remnants of the sea,

and heard fat sing up bread, a better dying.

The magnet in each seed of the green pepper kept her flying,

floating toward memories that throb like clustered stars:

the dark water laughter of ducks, a tangle of November oaks,

toward sudden music on a wheel of brilliant dust

where like a moon she must leap back and forth

from emptiness. “I remember the moon shimmering

loss and discovery along a water edge, and skirting

a slice of carrot, I welcome eternity in that sad eye of autumn.

Rare and real, I dance while vegetables sing in pairs.

I hug my death, my chorus of years, and search

and stretch and leap, for I will be apprentice to the blood

in spite of the mood of a world

that keeps rusting, rusting the wild throats of birds.”

**IV.**

In lamplight she saw the smoke of another’s dream:

her daughter walk woods where snow weighs down pine,

her son cry on a bridge that ends in deep-rooted dark,

her man, stalled on a lonely road, realize his torque

was alcohol and hatred. “Hungry for silence, I listen

to wind, to the sound of water running down mountain,

my own raw breath. Between the sounds, a seaborn god

plays his reed in the caverns of my being.

I wear his amethyst, let go my dreams: Millars, Lacewings,

and Junebugs scatter, widen and batter the dark,

brightening this loud dust with the fever of their eyes.

Oh crazy itch that grabs us beyond loss

and lets us forgive, so that we can answer birds and deer,

lightning and rain, shadow and hurricane.

Truth waits in the creek, cutting the winter brown hills.

It sings with needles of ice, sings because of its scar.”

Roberta Hill Whiteman, “Leap in the Dark” from *Star Quilt.* Copyright © 1984 by Roberta Hill Whiteman. Used by permission of Holy Cow! Press, [www.holycowpress.org](http://www.holycowpress.org" \t "_blank).

Source: *Star Quilt* (Holy Cow! Press, 1984)

**In Prison**

By [Jean Valentine](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/jean-valentine)

In prison

without being accused

or reach your family

or have a family            You have

conscience

heart trouble

asthma

manic-depressive

(we lost the baby)

no meds

no one

no window

black water

nail-scratched walls

your pure face turned away

embarrassed

you

who the earth was for.

Jean Valentine, “In Prison,” from *The New Yorker* (May 27, 2007). Used by permission of the author.  
  
Source: *The New Yorker* (Unpublished Collection, 2007)

**Prisoners**

By [Denise Levertov](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/denise-levertov)

Though the road turn at last

to death’s ordinary door,

and we knock there, ready

to enter and it opens

easily for us,

                     yet

all the long journey

we shall have gone in chains,

fed on knowledge-apples

acrid and riddled with grubs.

We taste other food that life,

like a charitable farm-girl,

holds out to us as we pass—

but our mouths are puckered,

a taint of ash on the tongue.

It’s not joy that we’ve lost—

wildfire, it flares

in dark or shine as it will.

What’s gone

is common happiness,

plain bread we could eat

with the old apple of knowledge.

That old one—it griped us sometimes,

but it was firm, tart,

sometimes delectable ...

The ashen apple of these days

grew from poisoned soil. We are prisoners

and must eat

our ration. All the long road

in chains, even if, after all,

we come to

death’s ordinary door, with time

smiling its ordinary

long-ago smile.

Denise Levertov, “Prisoners” from *Oblique Prayers*. Copyright © 1984 by Denise Levertov. Reprinted with the permission of New Directions Publishing Corporation, [www.wwnorton.com/nd/welcome.htm](http://www.wwnorton.com/nd/welcome.htm" \t "_blank).

**Warning from a Visitor in the Control Tower**

By [Calvin Thomas Jr.](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/calvin-thomas)

To airmen crossing and communicant

With orders of this field, no landing here

But by the grace of God; no postulant

Piloting earthward should abuse his fear:

Trust in the instruments which fall their round,

Tonight the only ceiling is the ground;

Zero, from nothing into nothing made,

Signifies all of altitude that stayed.

Notice the fog that makes me all but blind;

Here in the tower my skeleton will do

To signal you. I am for all your kind

Tonight’s full complement and only crew.

Airmen, I hope you read loud and clear;

Your radios sound happy and sincere:

Roger, you say, and dive for wreaths of holly

Thinking the next voice heard will be as jolly.

Suggest you take along the death’s-head flag

And hope that waving it will set you free.

Judgment, like flights, may be a game of tag

And you can shake and plead the Varsity.

Say that team spirit was your only motive:

You shot them up and did a locomotive.

What if there is a temporary fetter?

Christ understands. He also got his letter.

I have you, heroes, holding each your course:

You shot them up a little, and you grope

Tonight with neither memory nor remorse;

My skull is watching in the radarscope.

I marvel as I track your sure downfall

How you can navigate or fly at all

For thinking of the tallies without log

Until you make an error in this fog.

**“There is a button on the remote control called FAV...”**

By [Claudia Rankine](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/claudia-rankine)

There is a button on the remote control called FAV. You can program your favorite channels. Don’t like the world you live in, choose one closer to the world you live in. I choose the independent film channel and HBO. Neither have news programs as far as I can tell. This is what is great about America—anyone can make these kinds of choices. Instead of the news, HBO has *The Sopranos*. This week the indie channel is playing and replaying Spaghetti Westerns. Always someone gets shot or pierced through the heart with an arrow, and just before he dies he says, I am not going to make it. Where? Not going to make it where? On some level, maybe, the phrase simply means not going to make it into the next day, hour, minute, or perhaps the next second. Occasionally, you can imagine, it means he is not going to make it to Carson City or Texas or somewhere else out west or to Mexico if he is on the run. On another level always implicit is the sense that it means he is not going to make it to his own death. Perhaps in the back of all our minds is the life expectancy for our generation. Perhaps this expectation lingers there alongside the hours of sleep one should get or the number of times one is meant to chew food—eight hours, twenty chews, and seventy-six years. We are all heading there and not to have that birthday is not to have made it.

**For My People**

By [Margaret Walker](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/margaret-walker)

For my people everywhere singing their slave songs

     repeatedly: their dirges and their ditties and their blues

     and jubilees, praying their prayers nightly to an

     unknown god, bending their knees humbly to an

     unseen power;

For my people lending their strength to the years, to the

    gone years and the now years and the maybe years,

    washing ironing cooking scrubbing sewing mending

    hoeing plowing digging planting pruning patching

    dragging along never gaining never reaping never

    knowing and never understanding;

For my playmates in the clay and dust and sand of Alabama

    backyards playing baptizing and preaching and doctor

    and jail and soldier and school and mama and cooking

    and playhouse and concert and store and hair and

    Miss Choomby and company;

For the cramped bewildered years we went to school to learn

    to know the reasons why and the answers to and the

    people who and the places where and the days when, in

    memory of the bitter hours when we discovered we

    were black and poor and small and different and nobody

    cared and nobody wondered and nobody understood;

For the boys and girls who grew in spite of these things to

    be man and woman, to laugh and dance and sing and

    play and drink their wine and religion and success, to

    marry their playmates and bear children and then die

    of consumption and anemia and lynching;

For my people thronging 47th Street in Chicago and Lenox

    Avenue in New York and Rampart Street in New

    Orleans, lost disinherited dispossessed and happy

    people filling the cabarets and taverns and other

    people’s pockets and needing bread and shoes and milk and

    land and money and something—something all our own;

For my people walking blindly spreading joy, losing time

     being lazy, sleeping when hungry, shouting when

     burdened, drinking when hopeless, tied, and shackled

     and tangled among ourselves by the unseen creatures

     who tower over us omnisciently and laugh;

For my people blundering and groping and floundering in

     the dark of churches and schools and clubs

     and societies, associations and councils and committees and

     conventions, distressed and disturbed and deceived and

     devoured by money-hungry glory-craving leeches,

     preyed on by facile force of state and fad and novelty, by

     false prophet and holy believer;

For my people standing staring trying to fashion a better way

    from confusion, from hypocrisy and misunderstanding,

    trying to fashion a world that will hold all the people,

    all the faces, all the adams and eves and their countless generations;

Let a new earth rise. Let another world be born. Let a

    bloody peace be written in the sky. Let a second

    generation full of courage issue forth; let a people

    loving freedom come to growth. Let a beauty full of

    healing and a strength of final clenching be the pulsing

    in our spirits and our blood. Let the martial songs

    be written, let the dirges disappear. Let a race of men now

    rise and take control.

Margaret Walker, “For My People” from *This is My Century: New and Collected Poems*. Copyright © 1989 by Margaret Walker.  Reprinted by permission of  University of Georgia Press.  
  
Source: *Poetry* (November 1937).

**Money**

By [Howard Nemerov](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/howard-nemerov)

*an introductory lecture*

This morning we shall spend a few minutes

Upon the study of symbolism, which is basic

To the nature of money. I show you this nickel.

Icons and cryptograms are written all over

The nickel: one side shows a hunchbacked bison

Bending his head and curling his tail to accommodate

The circular nature of money. Over him arches

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA, and, squinched in

Between that and his rump, E PLURIBUS UNUM,

A Roman reminiscence that appears to mean

An indeterminately large number of things

All of which are the same. Under the bison

A straight line giving him a ground to stand on

Reads FIVE CENTS. And on the other side of our nickel

There is the profile of a man with long hair

And a couple of feathers in the hair; we know

Somehow that he is an American Indian, and

He wears the number nineteen-thirty-six.

Right in front of his eyes the word LIBERTY, bent

To conform with the curve of the rim, appears

To be falling out of the sky Y first; the Indian

Keeps his eyes downcast and does not notice this;

To notice it, indeed, would be shortsighted of him.

So much for the iconography of one of our nickels,

Which is now becoming a rarity and something of

A collectors’ item: for as a matter of fact

There is almost nothing you can buy with a nickel,

The representative American Indian was destroyed

A hundred years or so ago, and his descendants’

Relations with liberty are maintained with reservations,

Or primitive concentration camps; while the bison,

Except for a few examples kept in cages,

Is now extinct. Something like that, I think,

Is what Keats must have meant in his celebrated

Ode on a Grecian Urn.

                               Notice, in conclusion,

A number of circumstances sometimes overlooked

Even by experts: (*a*) Indian and bison,

Confined to obverse and reverse of the coin,

Can never see each other; (*b*) they are looking

In opposite directions, the bison past

The Indian’s feathers, the Indian past

The bison’s tail; (*c*) they are upside down

To one another; (*d*) the bison has a human face

Somewhat resembling that of Jupiter Ammon.

I hope that our studies today will have shown you

Something of the import of symbolism

With respect to the understanding of what is symbolized.

Howard Nemerov, “Money” from *The Collected Poems of Howard Nemerov* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1977). Copyright © 1977 by Howard Nemerov. Reprinted with the permission of Margaret Nemerov.

**Faith**

By [Linda Pastan](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/linda-pastan)

*For Ira*

With the seal of science

emblazoned

on your forehead,

like the old Good Housekeeping

Seal of Approval,

I believe what you tell me

about cells and molecules,

though I can't see them.

And though the language you speak

is full of numbers and symbols

I'll never understand;

though your tie is askew

and your hair unruly, still I believe

what you say about the size of the universe,

which is either expanding or contracting,

I've forgotten which already.

So if tomorrow you tell me

you made a small miscalculation,

that God indeed created the world

in 6 short days, then rested on the 7th,

that it was Eve who landed us

in all this trouble, I would believe you.

I would believe you

as I've always done before.

Source: *Poetry* (December 2002).