The Layers

SUMMARY

The speaker claims to have experienced many lives, only some of which actually belonged to him, and to be a different person than he once was. But some core element of who he is has remained constant throughout all these lives, and he struggles to stay true to it.

When the speaker looks back at what he's lived through so far—something that he needs to in order to find the strength to move forward on his journey—he sees a landscape filled with milestones stretching back to the horizon. He sees slowly burning fires left behind at empty campsites, and slowly flying angels (possibly birds) scavenging around them.

The speaker grieves that his social circle, which he formed out of the people he truly loved, has broken apart. He wonders how the heart can cope with such abundant loss. As the wind picks up, he seems to feel the dust of dead friends wildly and harshly stinging his face.

Despite all this, the speaker turns to move forward with a kind of triumph, still determined to go wherever life takes him and feeling that even the smallest thing on this journey holds value. He recalls that in his worst moment, when everything seemed dark and broken, a mystical voice told him to focus on life's deep *layers* rather than its surface *litter*. Although he's not sure what this message means, he's sure that more unavoidable transitions are in store for him. He knows he will keep changing.

THEMES

LIFE, LOSS, AND TRANSFORMATION

"The Layers" is a poem about making peace with loss and summoning the will to keep going in spite of sorrow. Its speaker looks back over a harsh, desolate landscape that symbolizes a lifetime (or "many lives'" worth) of loss and change. By confronting this past, the speaker finds the strength to forge ahead, with the help of some mystical advice: "Live in the layers, / not on the litter." In other words, don't dwell on the littered "wreckage" of loss; instead, appreciate the transformative experiences that have given rise to it. The poem as a whole suggests that by embracing life's unavoidable changes, one can reconcile oneself to loss and prepare for their "next chapter."

The poem's speaker claims to have "walked through many lives, / some of them my own," a metaphorical way of talking about the immense amount of change people go through the longer they live and the losses that such change inevitably entails. The speaker doesn't even feel like the same person he once was, and "struggles" to cling to "some principle of being"—some core identity—that has remained throughout the years.

For the speaker, these mounting losses make it hard to keep going on life's "journey": looking back on all those lifetimes, the speaker sees a landscape filled with fading "milestones," dwindling "fires," and "abandoned campsites." These images represent the speaker's changing identity, sense of self, and perhaps even lost homes and loved ones. The speaker adds that the "tribe" of his "affections" has been "scattered"—implying that many of his loved ones are now distant or dead. As the "dust" of dead friends "bitterly stings [the speaker's] face," he wonders how to move forward while carrying the weight of all that's lost and the knowledge of all the loss to come.

But the speaker is not defeated by this loss; instead, in facing the full magnitude of their life's experience, he finds meaning, beauty, and value. The speaker is in fact "compelled" to look back before gathering "strength / to proceed," suggesting that, painful as it may be, confronting the extent of his losses actually *helps* him move on. By the time the speaker "turn[s]" forward to the future, he's even rejoicing somewhat: another sign that facing loss squarely has lifted his spirits. He feels renewed willpower and appreciates how "precious" the "road" ahead is, difficult as it may be.

Ultimately, the willingness to appreciate life in its full depth—not just focus on the loss that life inevitably generates—gives the speaker strength to face future changes. He recalls an even more difficult phase of his journey ("my darkest night"), when a mystical voice helped him by advising: "Live in the layers, / not on the litter." This implies that it's healthier to appreciate the depth of experience life offers than to obsess over the "litter" of "wreckage" that life produces in the end. Everything breaks or dies eventually, but its meaning can't be reduced to its final, broken state.

With this advice in mind, the speaker prepares for future "changes," accepting that upheaval is an inevitable part of life (is "already written" in a "book of transformations"). Additionally, the speaker may be preparing for his own death—the final "transformation."

Although "The Layers" is a poem about age and sorrow, it's thus also a poem about carrying on despite those things. When you've survived enough turmoil, it suggests, there can be both deep sadness and a kind of exhilaration in further survival. Meanwhile, if properly confronted and honored, the very loss that seems an overwhelming burden can become a source of strength.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-44

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-3

I have walked ...
... who I was,

The poem begins with several mysterious, seemingly paradoxical statements. The speaker claims to "have walked through many lives, / some of them my own," and adds that "I am not who I was." What could it mean to have experienced multiple lifetimes—only *some* of which were yours—and not to be your former self after you've lived through them?

The speaker isn't some sort of supernatural entity who's been reincarnated and remembers past lives. Instead, these statements are metaphorical descriptions of aging (written by a poet in his 70s). This is a speaker who's old, weary, and experienced enough to *feel* as if he's lived multiple lifetimes. He now feels like a completely different person than he used to be, so some of his past identities at least *seem* to belong to other people. In any case, he's lost "who [he] was" originally. Right away, these lines establish transformation and loss as key themes of the poem.

They also establish a pattern of short, free verse lines that will continue throughout the poem: the line lengths will vary, but they'll never exceed eight syllables or drop below three. As a result, the poem's pace is slow and marked by frequent pauses—appropriate for an elderly, tired speaker.

The word "walked" (line 1) is another important detail: as the poem takes shape, it becomes clear that the speaker is journeying by foot through a desolate landscape. But this landscape is charged with symbolism, suggesting that his journey is more symbolic than literal. What does it represent? The word "lives" (line 1) is another early clue. The poem traces the journey of life itself—or, rather, the plural *lives* people seem to pass through if they're lucky to survive long enough.

LINES 4-6

though some principle ...
... not to stray.

After the slightly paradoxical opening lines, the speaker makes another statement that sounds mysterious, even mystical. Though his identity has changed over the years—apparently more than once—the speaker asserts that "some principle of being / abides, from which I struggle / not to stray."

The statement suggests that some core aspect of the speaker's identity, or "being," has stayed intact through all these changes, and that he's trying to stay true to it. It may even be a core aspect of "being" itself—a "principle" that unites all of life.

Exactly what this principle is, the speaker doesn't say; it's left to the reader's interpretation. What's most important is that the speaker feels that *something* has stayed constant in his experience, despite the transformations he's gone through. He may "struggle / not to stray" from this core principle, but he still hasn't strayed from it. Presumably, he will keep trying to adhere to it in this monologue and beyond. (Stanley Kunitz wrote "The Layers" for a volume of his collected poems—50 years' worth of poems!—so he may have in mind some larger theme or principle that unites his own work.)

The alliteration in "struggle" and "stray," together with the short /uh/ assonance in "some," "from," and "struggle" (continuing from "some of" and "was" in lines 2-3), adds weight and emphasis—a kind of sonic burden—to these lines about struggle. Enjambment emphasizes a series of thematically important words that come directly before and after the line breaks: "being," "abides," and "struggle" (as well as the "not" in "not to stray"). This is a poem about the struggles of a lifetime, and what *abides* (endures) throughout those struggles. It's also a poem about holding oneself together and moving forward in spite of loss, rather than straying into some form of despair.

LINES 7-10

When I look ...
... on my journey,

In lines 7-10, the speaker starts to look back ("look behind") at his past. He explains that he's "compelled" (moved or obligated) to do this "before [he] can gather strength / to proceed on [his] journey."

Nothing external compels him to look backward; he's responding to an *inner* need. As lines 1-6 have already hinted—with their references to "walk[ing] through many lives" and "struggl[ing] / not to stray" from the core of one's being—the "journey" described here is metaphorical. In fact, the speaker's journey throughout the poem is an extended metaphor for the journey of life; the "road" he travels (line 30) is the road of experience. Looking back in order to "gather strength" makes sense in this context: the speaker means that he needs to confront, and make some kind of peace with, his past in order to move on with his life.

Notice how these short lines and slow-building clauses (the main verb of the sentence doesn't appear till line 11 with "I see") seem to mimic the "gather[ing]" of strength:

> When I look behind,
> as I am compelled to look
> before I can gather strength
> to proceed on my journey,

In general, the first 10 lines have been slow, meditative, and

abstract; only in the following passage will some concrete imagery enter the poem. It's as if the speaker is quietly setting the stage and gathering his thoughts before describing the journey itself.

LINES 11-16

I see the ...
... on heavy wings.

In the single sentence spanning lines 11-16 ("I see [...] heavy wings.") the speaker describes the landscape behind him, which symbolizes the past he's looking back at.

It's a bleak, desolate landscape: the only features the speaker describes are "milestones" (mile markers) along the road and "slow fires trailing" from "abandoned camp-sites." The speaker seems to be the only human presence in the area, and the only other signs of life are "scavenger angels" that "wheel on heavy wings." These could be supernatural angels, or the speaker could be metaphorically describing birds—perhaps scavenger birds, like vultures. Regardless, these creatures are feeding on whatever scraps the humans left behind at their campsites. They may even be feeding (scavenging) on dead bodies.

All in all, this is a symbolic scene of loss, death, decay, and isolation. The speaker's past contains what might once have been cheerful homes or gathering places—symbolized by the campsites—but those sites are deserted and death-haunted now.

The abandoned, still-burning fires suggest a lost communal warmth (though they might also represent a warmth the speaker still *feels* toward his past, as when one still loves an "old flame"). The "heavy" wings of the scavengers seem to evoke the weight of loss, or the heaviness of the speaker's heart as he looks back in mourning.

The speaker will elaborate on his isolation in the following lines, when he laments that the "tribe" of his loved ones is "scattered" and mourns his "friends [...] who fell along the way." But already, this symbolic landscape hints that the speaker is grieving a lost community.

Several poetic devices add to the sense of loss in this passage. Enjambment makes the words "dwindling" and "trailing" seem—appropriately enough—to dwindle or trail off at the ends of their respective lines. In fact, four out of the six lines here are enjambed, so that the sentence itself seems slow and heavily broken up. The alliteration of "wheel" and "wings" (line 16) adds the weight of extra emphasis to a line about "heav[iness]." All of these subtle formal effects, combined with bleak imagery, contribute to the scene's mournful atmosphere.

LINES 17-21

Oh, I have ...
... feast of losses?

Lines 17-21 make the speaker's grief explicit and offer some sense of why he's grieving.

He breaks out into a sudden exclamation of sorrow: "Oh, I have made myself a tribe / out of my true affections, / and my tribe is scattered!" The word "tribe" seems to fit this remote, desert-like landscape, but it doesn't seem to refer to a larger people, society, etc. Instead, the speaker is mourning a tribe of his "true affections"—the community of people he loved best.

Importantly, this was a community the speaker "made [him]self": a group of loved ones he gathered around him and chose to be around, rather than a group he was born into. The alliteration between "tribe" and "true" links these two words closely, emphasizing how much this tribe, or community, was *defined* by real affection. Now, however, that community has "scattered," leaving the speaker lonely.

The speaker then asks a rhetorical question, one that the poem invites readers to ponder also: "How shall the heart be reconciled / to its feast of losses?" In other words, how can the human heart cope with the abundance of loss it experiences, especially over the course of a long life? Notice the bitterly ironic, paradoxical quality of the metaphor "feast of losses," which suggests an *abundance* of *lack*, or a feeling that you're *full* of what you're *missing*.

Rhetorical questions are intended to make a point—they're not meant to be answered—so in a sense, these lines are just another exclamation of grief. Still, the remainder of the poem will suggest an indirect answer, by showing how the speaker moves on from loss (with the help of some mystical advice).

LINES 22-25

In a rising ...
... stings my face.

Building on the themes of grief and loss explored in the previous lines, the speaker now presents a strange, haunting image: the speaker claims that the dust—the ashes or remains—of his dead friends is blowing in his face.

In a way, this detail suits the poem's apparent setting: a dusty, desolate wasteland. But as with all the images in the poem, this one reads as more symbolic than literal. It conveys an emotional truth: as the speaker journeys through life, he *feels* stung by the memory of friends he's lost. Those memories seem to swirl around him "bitterly": that is, they contain the bitterness he and/or they felt at their early deaths. The repetitive sounds in these lines—the alliteration of "friends"/"fell"/"face" and the assonance of "bitterly stings"—subtly mimics the repetitive swirling and stinging.

The word "manic," meanwhile, literally means "suffering from mania"—that is, from the frenzied, overexcited behavior typical of certain mood disorders. In context, then, "manic" implies that the dust is swirling around in a wild, frenzied fashion. However, this unusual word choice might also suggest:

1. That the dead friends are somehow frantic (desperately unhappy in the afterlife, desperate to get the attention of the living, etc.), or that the speaker imagines them that way.
2. That the dead friends were manic or emotionally volatile in life. (Kunitz's friends included some fellow writers and artists who struggled with mental health issues, so this isn't out of the question.)

Regardless, the personified dust is a disturbing, evocative illustration of how people we've lost can seem to stay with us, their memories causing us pain long after they're gone.

LINES 26-31

Yet I turn, ...
... precious to me.

Lines 26-31 mark an important turn in the poem. In fact, they show the speaker literally "turn[ing]" forward after his look back at the past. They also convey a shift in mood, as the speaker transitions from mourning the places and people he's left behind to "exulting somewhat" over the journey still ahead.

"Exulting" means rejoicing, often in triumph. For the speaker, turning back toward the future after so much mourning is a kind of emotional and spiritual victory. He's gathered the strength he needed to gather, and he celebrates the fact that his "will [is] intact to go / wherever I need to go." He appreciates the value of the future that remains to him: "every stone on the road / [is] precious to me." The word "somewhat" qualifies the mood shift, however; he hasn't entirely stopped grieving or forgotten the loved ones he's lost.

The repetition in this passage is all the more notable because the poem doesn't depend much on repetitive structures throughout. The immediate repetition of "I turn, I turn"—an example of epizeuxis—helps convey the speaker's rising excitement. The repetition of "to go" with only a few words in between—an example of diacope—also sounds strongly affirmative, or self-affirming. (The speaker could almost be rooting himself on: "Go, go!")

Extensive /t/ consonance ("Yet," "turn," "turn," "exulting," etc.) adds a lightly tripping, pleasant sound to the passage, while /w/ alliteration ("with," "will," "wherever") and /oh/ assonance ("go," "go," "stone," "road") gives these exultant lines an emphatic ring.

LINES 32-36

In my darkest ...
... directed me:

Lines 32-36 metaphorically describe a low point in the speaker's life, followed by a source of hope that broke through his despair.

"In my darkest night" recalls phrases like "dark night of the soul" (and may be an allusion to a 16th-century poem traditionally called by that title: *La noche oscura del alma*, by St. John of the Cross). For the speaker, this was a time in his life when "the moon was covered"—he couldn't see any "light" of hope, comfort, etc.—and he "roamed through wreckage."

This "wreckage" stands in for the loss and destruction in his life, or the ruins he felt his life had become. Meanwhile, the verb "roamed" implies wandering aimlessly rather than journeying on a clear road forward, as the speaker is currently doing (or trying to keep doing). It's close to the verb "stray" in line 6, which is what the speaker is trying *not* to do. He wants to stick to his true path, but during his "darkest night," he seems to have lacked that sense of direction.

Just then, "a nimbus-clouded voice / directed [him]"—that is, both *instructed* him and *gave him direction*. The word "nimbus-clouded" has mystical or religious connotations. "Nimbus" can refer to a type of actual cloud; it can also refer to the halo or aura surrounding saints and gods in religious art. So "nimbus-clouded" might indicate:

1. That the mysterious voice spoke out of the sky;
2. That it came from God or some other luminous, haloed presence;
3. Or both!

In any case, the general sense is that it carried holy authority. It seems to have offered salvation, in the form of advice (lines 37-38), during the speaker's "night" of despair.

LINES 37-38

"Live in the ...
... on the litter."

In lines 37-38, the speaker quotes the advice offered by the mystical "voice," and in the process, delivers the key lesson of the poem:

> "Live in the layers,
> not on the litter."

Clearly, this advice resonated with the speaker and is meant to resonate with the reader. It's the source of the poem's title, so it must be central to the poem's meaning. It's emphasized through alliteration ("Live"/"layers"/"litter") and assonance ("Live"/"in"/"litter"; "not on"). Yet in the next lines, the speaker will claim to be puzzled by it. So what does it mean?

The biggest clue is the connection between the word "litter" and the earlier phrase "roamed through wreckage" (line 34). "Litter" can mean "trash dropped on the ground," and that might be part of its meaning here, but it can also mean something very much like "wreckage": scattered, broken pieces.

During the worst phase of the speaker's life—his "darkest night"—he found himself bogged down in the shattered ruins he felt his life had become. He was wandering through wreckage, wallowing in wreckage. This sounds a lot like what the mystical

voice urges him *not* to do: "Live [...] on the litter."

Instead, the voice directs him to "Live in the layers." This seems to be a metaphor about what a wise person should and shouldn't focus on. It sets up a contrast between obsessing over brokenness and loss (bad) versus embracing life's overall, multi-"layer[ed]" experience (good). It implies that there's something superficial about dwelling *on* tragedy and loss, rather than immersing yourself *in* the full depths that life has to offer. Ultimately, the advice suggests that while life inevitably brings a "litter" of loss, it shouldn't be *reduced to* or *defined by* loss. It should be appreciated in all its complexity—all its "layers" of transformation.

LINES 39-44

Though I lack ...
... with my changes.

In the final lines of the poem, the speaker claims not to understand the mystical advice about "Liv[ing] in the layers," yet he seems to absorb and apply it on some level. He clearly keeps it in mind as he looks ahead to future "changes" in his life.

"I lack the art / to decipher it," the speaker says of the advice. In other words, he lacks the skill to interpret it. This claim seems to put a little distance between the *speaker*, who's puzzled by the advice, and the *poet*, who wrote it! Then again, maybe the speaker is a stand-in for Kunitz and is being a little coy.

By looking ahead to "the next chapter / in my book of transformations," the speaker acknowledges that his life will contain further layers of change. He does not "doubt" that the "next chapter" in his life "is already written"; that is, he can't control the future changes he'll experience. He seems ready to go with the flow and resigned to whatever fate brings. He even seems proud (or "exult[ant]," as in line 27) as he announces that "I am not done with my changes." In all these ways, the speaker seems to have taken the mystical advice that supposedly baffles him. Although he still feels grief, he isn't just dwelling on the "litter" of loss; he's serenely facing the future.

All of the poem's sentences begin at the beginning of lines and end at the end of lines. However, the final line, line 44, is the only one that consists of a complete sentence. This unique feature lends extra weight and emphasis to the speaker's closing affirmation. Notice, too, how the speaker's description of change *enacts* change: "my [...] transformations" in line 42 becomes the simpler "my changes" in line 44.

Since Kunitz wrote "The Layers" as a "summing-up poem" for an edition of his collected works, these final lines (like the poem as a whole) may have an autobiographical element. In other words, the "book of transformations" might be more than a metaphor for life's variety: it might refer to Kunitz's own book, which summed up his many transformations as a writer.

SYMBOLS

JOURNEYS/ROADS

The speaker's entire "journey" (line 10) is symbolic. It represents the journey of life—the progression from birth, youth, and innocence to old age, experience, and death. It also suggests a journey of spiritual growth, as the speaker comes to embrace his full experience and the necessity of transformation. The speaker mentions the "many lives" he's "walked through," suggesting that his life has been long enough (his experience vast enough) to encompass multiple profound shifts in identity.

There are many more discrete symbols within this broader one:

- The "milestones" in line 11, for example, might refer to mile-markers along the road, but also represent important events in the speaker's life. They help signal that the speaker's "journey" is a metaphorical or allegorical one.
- Over the course of the poem, the speaker looks back on these "milestones," struggles to cope with loss before "proceed[ing]" on his life's journey, and finally looks ahead to future life "changes." The "way" or the "road" (lines 24 and 30) evokes the one-way road from youth to age, while the title of the poem, "The Layers," refers to layers of life experience.
- The "dust" of "those who fell along the way," meanwhile, represents lost friends and loved ones, whose memory still pains ("stings") the speaker. The ending then hints that the speaker's future "transformations" will include a final major change: his own death.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-16
- Lines 22-25
- Lines 26-31
- Lines 39-44

CAMPSITES/CAMPFIRES

Since "The Layers" follows the journey of the speaker's life, the "abandoned camp-sites" (line 14) seem to symbolize places that were meaningful to him—and that he's now moved on from, willingly or otherwise. They could represent former homes, for example, or other gathering places for the "tribe" of his loved ones. The "slow fires" of those sites, meanwhile, connote their warmth and vitality (which is slowly waning, "trailing," in the speaker's wake).

The fact that the speaker refers to such important spaces as

"camp-sites," which are traditionally rustic and no-frills, is important. The poem's overall setting is a desolate environment that reflects life's difficult journey. The landscape seems primitive or at least remote from civilization, conveying the harshness of the human struggle for survival. Along his "road" through this wasteland (the path through life), the speaker "made [himself] a tribe" of those he loved most, and gathered with them at warm but temporary "camp-sites." Now those sites are deserted of everything but "fires" and "scavenger angels"; his "tribe is scattered," and he walks the road alone.

Together, all these details suggest that the speaker has lived a long but struggle-filled life. He found some people he truly loved and made temporary homes with them, but now those homes and loved ones are gone—in fact, many of his friends are dead—and he's left to mourn alone. Whether they're birds or angels of death, the "scavenger angels" underscore the fact that these homes no longer contain a vibrant, human presence.

Still, the old fires haven't gone out yet, suggesting that the speaker still remembers, and misses, the warmth of the places he can't return to. (Think of expressions like "old flame" or "carrying a torch [for someone]," which indicate a love that hasn't fully died.)

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 13-19:** "and the slow fires trailing / from the abandoned camp-sites, / over which scavenger angels / wheel on heavy wings. / Oh, I have made myself a tribe / out of my true affections, / and my tribe is scattered!"

SCAVENGER ANGELS

The "scavenger angels" in line 15 symbolize death, decay, and loss.

Kunitz might want the reader to picture actual angels: ominous figures like the Angel of Death in the Abrahamic religions. After all, this is a setting in which some "nimbus-clouded voice" speaks out of the darkness, so other divine or supernatural creatures might be present, too.

Alternatively, "scavenger angels" might be a metaphor for birds circling the "abandoned camp-sites." Their "heavy wings," and their presence in this harsh landscape, bring to mind large carrion birds, such as desert vultures.

Either way, these eerie creatures are looking for leftovers: "scaveng[ing]" implies feasting on dead bodies, scraps, or other unpleasant remains. Symbolically, their presence suggests that the speaker's old homes and gathering places are lost forever—he can't go back. They might even have been shadowed by the death of loved ones before he moved on.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 13-16:** "and the slow fires trailing / from the abandoned camp-sites, / over which scavenger angels / wheel on heavy wings."

DUST

The "dust of my friends" (lines 22-25) is symbolically linked with death. It's an image that combines two main associations: roadside dust (or desert sand) and the dust (or ashes) of dead bodies.

Dust is common in the kind of harsh desert landscape the speaker is traveling. It also features in a well-known, death-related phrase from the *Book of Common Prayer*: "Ashes to ashes, dust to dust." (In other words, bodies come from the earth and return to the earth after they die.) Ashes and dust are also specifically associated with cremated remains.

Putting all this together, the speaker claims (or imagines) that the "dust of [his] friends"—those who "fell along the way," or died before he did—is actually blowing in his face as he walks the road of life. The windblown dust seems "manic," or wild and frenzied. (Manic behavior is associated with certain mood disorders, and many writers and artists have famously suffered from such disorders, so Kunitz may be indirectly referring to friends' mental health struggles.) The dust "bitterly stings" the speaker's face, suggesting the pain and resentment the speaker feels in the wake of loss. The bitterness also seems linked with the friends themselves—their resentment at dying early, perhaps, or the inherent sadness (bitterness) of their deaths.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 22-25:** "In a rising wind / the manic dust of my friends, / those who fell along the way, / bitterly stings my face."

NIGHT

The "darkest night" described in lines 32-38 symbolizes the lowest point in the speaker's life. It's reminiscent of—and may be an allusion to—the "dark night of the soul" described in a 16th-century poem often given the same title (*La noche oscura del alma*, by St. John of the Cross).

During the "night" Kunitz's speaker recalls, "the moon was covered" and he "roamed through wreckage." The implication is that he hit rock bottom and felt the darkness of despair. He couldn't find any intellectual, emotional, or spiritual illumination ("moon[light]") to cheer or guide him. He felt that his entire life was in ruins—reduced to "wreckage." In the end, he seems to have been saved by the spiritual wisdom of the "nimbus-clouded voice" that spoke out of the darkness. (Similarly, the poem by St. John of the Cross rejoices at the speaker's spiritual salvation.)

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 32-38:** "In my darkest night, / when the moon was covered / and I roamed through wreckage, / a nimbus-clouded voice / directed me: / "Live in the layers, / not on the litter.""

WRECKAGE/LITTER

"Wreckage" in line 34 and "litter" in line 38 mean roughly the same thing. Both words suggest broken pieces and scattered refuse, fragments of something destroyed. In context, both words symbolize the speaker's accumulated losses, as well as his sense of being shattered by grief.

During his lowest moment—his "darkest night"—the speaker's entire life seemed to lie in ruins. Rather than journeying pleasantly and purposefully through life, he "roamed through wreckage." In other words, he was bogged down by the sense that everything around him, and perhaps everything within him, was broken.

He was rescued, however, by the mystical advice to "Live in the layers, / not on the litter." Symbolically, this advice suggests that it's better to contemplate, and appreciate, your experience as a whole than to obsess over what you've lost. Loss is a part of life, but life is more than just loss. Its depths (or "layers") matter more than the broken pieces (or "litter") that seem to clutter its surface once you've lived long enough.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 32-38:** "In my darkest night, / when the moon was covered / and I roamed through wreckage, / a nimbus-clouded voice / directed me: / "Live in the layers, / not on the litter.""

LAYERS

The poem contrasts "the layers" of life with "the litter." The layers symbolize the *depths* of life, or the accumulated weight of life experience. By contrast, the "litter" is the loss, destruction, etc. that life generates, and that it's all too easy to get bogged down in. The mystical voice in the poem—and the poem as a whole—recommends appreciating all the layers of one's experience, not just dwelling on the worst aspects.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 32-38:** "In my darkest night, / when the moon was covered / and I roamed through wreckage, / a nimbus-clouded voice / directed me: / "Live in the layers, / not on the litter.""

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

The alliteration sprinkled throughout the poem adds weight and emphasis to key words and lines.

For example, it adds a heavy sound to a number of phrases about slowness or difficulty: "I **s**truggle / not to **s**tray" (lines 5-6), "**w**heel on heavy **w**ings" (line 16), and "I **r**oamed through **w**reckage" (line 34). These alliterative moments seem to weigh down the lines, illustrating (respectively) the speaker's spiritual struggle, the slow and ominous flight of the "scavenger angels," and the speaker's sad wandering through the ruins of his life.

Alliteration can also draw thematic connections between the words it links. The alliteration between "**t**ribe" and "**t**rue" in lines 17-19, for example, suggests that the speaker's "tribe" of loved ones was *defined* by "true" affection:

> Oh, I have made myself a **t**ribe
> out of my **t**rue affections,
> and my **t**ribe is scattered!

The repeated /f/ sounds in "**f**riends"/"**f**ell"/"**f**ace" (lines 23-25) evoke the sharp, repetitive sting of "dust," while also linking the *friends* closely with their *fallenness*:

> the manic dust of my **f**riends,
> those who **f**ell along the way,
> bitterly stings my **f**ace

For the grieving speaker, early death is something that's come to define the "friends [...] who fell."

Most notably, alliteration underscores the poem's central message: "Live in the **l**ayers, / not on the **l**itter" (lines 37-38). Repeated /l/ sounds make this phrase especially resonant, affirming, and memorable. Interestingly, this phrase also alliterates with "**l**ack" in the following line—perhaps the poet's way of slightly undermining the poem's affirmation. (Notice that there's a bit of anticlimax in lines 39-40 anyway, as the speaker claims not to understand the holy message he's just quoted.)

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "struggle"
- **Line 6:** "stray"
- **Line 16:** "wheel," "wings"
- **Line 17:** "made," "myself," "tribe"
- **Line 18:** "true"
- **Line 19:** "tribe"
- **Line 23:** "friends"
- **Line 24:** "fell"

- **Line 25:** "face"
- **Line 28:** "with," "will"
- **Line 29:** "wherever"
- **Line 34:** "roamed," "wreckage"
- **Line 37:** "Live," "layers"
- **Line 38:** "litter"
- **Line 39:** "lack"
- **Line 40:** "decipher"
- **Line 41:** "no," "doubt," "next"

ASSONANCE

The poem's assonance is generally subtle, but it does help emphasize a few key passages.

For example, short /uh/ sounds help tie together the poem's opening sentence. Combined with /str/ alliteration ("struggle"/"stray"), they add some emphatic weight to these lines about struggling with the weight of the past:

> some of them my own,
> and I am not who I was,
> though some principle of being
> abides, from which I struggle

Later, the quick repetition of short /ih/ sounds, as well as /t/s, in "bitterly stings" (line 25) has a forceful, stinging quality. Long /o/ assonance (combined with /t/ consonance) draws extra attention to the poem's big "turn" (lines 26-31):

> Yet I turn, I turn,
> exulting somewhat,
> with my will intact to go
> wherever I need to go,
> and every stone on the road

These repeated vowels produce a joyful, "exulting" sound, reinforced by /t/s that seem to trip pleasantly along ("Yet"/"turn"/"turn"/"exulting"/"somewhat"/"intact"/"to"/"to"/"stone"/"to").

Along with /l/ alliteration, assonance also highlights the poem's key message (lines 37-38). Notice the repeated short /ih/ and long /o/ sounds: "Live in the layers, / not on the litter." These prominent sound effects make the message all the more memorable.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "some of"
- **Line 3:** "was"
- **Line 4:** "some"
- **Line 5:** "from," "struggle"
- **Line 10:** "proceed," "journey"
- **Line 11:** "see"

- **Line 25:** "bitterly stings"
- **Line 28:** "go"
- **Line 29:** "go"
- **Line 30:** "stone," "road"
- **Line 34:** "wreckage"
- **Line 36:** "directed"
- **Line 37:** "Live in"
- **Line 38:** "not on," "litter"

METAPHOR

"The Layers" takes place in a landscape that's charged with symbolism (see Symbols section for more). Everything in the poem suggests some kind of figurative meaning; nothing just "is what it is." But even within that general symbolic framework, the poem uses metaphors to describe specific aspects of the speaker's situation.

In lines 1-2, for example, "I have walked through many lives, / some of them my own" is a metaphor for accumulating so much life experience that you feel as if you've lived several times over. Broadly, the speaker's "journey" throughout the poem is an extended metaphor for the journey of life, the one-way road we travel from birth to death.

In lines 17-19, the speaker refers to the "tribe" he made "out of [his] true affections": in other words, the intimate social circle he formed out of the people he loved most. This metaphor seems to compare the speaker's loved ones to a remote desert tribe—once gathered but now "scattered"—in keeping with the overall setting of the poem (a desolate wasteland).

The speaker also refers to a "feast of losses" (line 21)—an ironic, almost paradoxical, metaphor that implies an *abundance* of *deprivation*. The speaker's losses are so numerous that they're set before him like the dishes of a feast. Unlike a feast, of course, they don't sustain him—just the opposite: they deprive him of what makes life worthwhile. Shortly afterward (line 23), the speaker describes the roadside dust blowing in his face as "manic." The word suggests wildness and frenzy, like the swirling motion of the dust—but since this is supposed to be the dust of his dead friends, "manic" might also hint at some quality (e.g., volatility) in the friends themselves.

Two more important metaphors come near the end of the poem. One is the mystical advice in lines 37-38: "Live in the layers, / not on the litter." The speaker claims not to understand the advice, but it's clearly metaphorical in nature. The "litter" seems to connect with the "wreckage" in line 34, which evokes the speaker's broken life, piled-up losses, etc. The metaphor seems to recommend appreciating life for all its "layers" of meaning, rather than stewing over the losses that are inevitable byproducts of a long, full life.

The final metaphor comes in lines 41-43: "no doubt the next chapter / in my book of transformations / is already written."

These lines draw on the cliché of "the next chapter" in one's life, suggesting that a new phase of the speaker's journey is still to come. The fact that the chapter is "already written" suggests that the speaker can only fulfill the destiny laid out for him. (This line may be inspired by religious imagery casting gods as the "authors" of human fate; see, for example, the Book of Life and Book of the Dead in Judaism.)

The metaphor may also hint at the final transformation that awaits the speaker: death. Finally, this ending may be the poet's way of winking at the reader about poems still to come. ("The Layers" was written for a book of Kunitz's collected poems—a record of the "transformations" in his long career.)

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "I have walked through many lives, / some of them my own,"
- **Line 10:** "to proceed on my journey,"
- **Lines 17-19:** "Oh, I have made myself a tribe / out of my true affections, / and my tribe is scattered!"
- **Lines 20-21:** "How shall the heart be reconciled / to its feast of losses?"
- **Line 23:** "the manic dust of my friends"
- **Lines 37-38:** ""Live in the layers, / not on the litter.""
- **Lines 41-43:** "no doubt the next chapter / in my book of transformations / is already written."

PARADOX

A few of the speaker's metaphors and phrases have a paradoxical quality. Take the opening lines, for example:

> I have walked through many lives,
> some of them my own,
> and I am not who I was,

These claims seem contradictory, impossible: how could one person walk through multiple lives? How could only "some of" those lives be their own? How could they not be the same person as they were, yet use the same "I" pronoun for their past and present self?

These contradictions are easiest to resolve if the lines are taken metaphorically. The speaker is old and experienced enough that he feels as if he's lived multiple lives, changed his (outward) identity more than once, and lost touch with some of the identities he used to wear. At the same time, some inner "principle" has remained constant throughout these changes (line 4). Even if the speaker is supposed to be some magical, reincarnated being, the *poet* is using his experience as a metaphor for aging and outgrowing your old self.

There's also a paradoxical element to the metaphor "feast of losses" in line 21. Feasts are defined by abundance, whereas loss is all about deprivation. The speaker claims to be experiencing an abundance of deprivation! There's a cruel irony here, suggesting not only the cruelty of loss but also how overwhelmed it's made the speaker feel. Playing off the food theme, you could say he feels "full" of emptiness.

Where Paradox appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-3:** "I have walked through many lives, / some of them my own, / and I am not who I was,"
- **Lines 20-21:** "How shall the heart be reconciled / to its feast of losses?"

REPETITION

The poem is written in free verse, so it doesn't contain repetitive structures like meter and rhyme. In fact, it doesn't contain a great deal of repetition in general; it tends to advance rather than circling back, perhaps because it describes a one-way journey and deals with irrecoverable losses. However, it does repeat a few key words and phrases.

For example, the word "tribe" appears twice in lines 17-19:

> Oh, I have made myself a tribe
> out of my true affections,
> and my tribe is scattered!

Here, the repetition (and more specifically diacope) emphasizes something especially important to the speaker: his lost circle, or "tribe," of friends and loved ones.

A more dramatic example of repetition occurs in line 26: "Yet I turn, I turn." This kind of repetition of words/phrases in immediate succession is called epizeuxis. It adds strong emphasis and, in this case, a joyful or "exulting" tone (as line 27 makes clear). The speaker repeats "I turn" in a kind of bittersweet victory cry, as he manages to turn forward and move on despite all the loss he's experienced.

More diacope appears in lines 28-29, as the speaker is "exulting" over his will to move forward:

> with my will intact to go
> wherever I need to go,

Once again, the repeated phrase ("to go") sounds ringingly affirmative. Both the epizeuxis and the diacope in this passage add to its mood of celebration. It's almost as if the speaker is cheering himself on: "Go, go!"

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Lines 17-19:** "Oh, I have made myself a tribe / out of my true affections, / and my tribe is scattered!"
- **Line 26:** "I turn, I turn,"
- **Lines 28-29:** "with my will intact to go / wherever I need

to go,"

IMAGERY

"The Layers" uses vivid imagery to describe the speaker's journey. His journey is highly symbolic, so all of the poem's images can be read figuratively as well as literally. In fact, it's pretty clear from the start that the poem is describing a spiritual journey, or "the journey of life," not just an ordinary hike through a desert landscape. (And in case that wasn't already clear, the mystical "voice" in lines 35-38 drives the point home.)

Even so, the images help bring the spiritual narrative to life and make it memorable. The poem's visual images include the "milestones [i.e., mile markers] dwindling / toward the horizon," "the slow fires trailing / from the abandoned camp-sites," and the "scavenger angels / wheel[ing] on heavy wings" over the campsites (lines 11-16).

There's also the windblown "dust" in lines 22-25, the "stone[s] on the road" in line 30, and the "darkest night," concealed "moon," "wreckage"/"litter," and "layers" in lines 32-38. An explanation of the symbolism behind these images can be found in the Line-by-Line and Symbols sections.

In addition to the visual images, the poem contains some tactile and auditory imagery. Lines 22-25 show us the "rising wind" that "bitterly stings [the speaker's] face" with the "dust" of his dead friends. This imagery helps the reader *feel* the sting and intensity of loss. The poem also helps readers *hear* its key message—"Live in the layers, / not on the litter"—by attributing it to a "nimbus-clouded voice" in the darkness. Perhaps this description means that the voice spoke through a halo-like cloud, or divine aura, in the night sky. More likely, it means that the voice *sounded* as if it were haloed and divine. Either way, the point is the same: the advice carried a mystical authority.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Lines 11-16:** "I see the milestones dwindling / toward the horizon / and the slow fires trailing / from the abandoned camp-sites, / over which scavenger angels / wheel on heavy wings."
- **Lines 22-25:** "In a rising wind / the manic dust of my friends, / those who fell along the way, / bitterly stings my face."
- **Lines 32-36:** "In my darkest night, / when the moon was covered / and I roamed through wreckage, / a nimbus-clouded voice / directed me:"

ENJAMBMENT

"The Layers" combines short lines (three to eight syllables) with a fairly high line count (44 lines in total). These formal qualities give the poem its tall, skinny appearance on the page. Many of its lines also break before the end of a complete grammatical phrase; in other words, they're enjambed.

Enjambment serves several functions in the poem. By breaking up clauses and sentences into smaller units, it subtly reinforces the poem's theme of brokenness (as in the reference to life's "wreckage" in line 34). However, the *ends* of the poem's sentences always coincide with the ends of lines (that is, there are no full stops in the middle of lines here)—a feature that adds a sense of predictability, stability, and wholeness. On the formal level, then, there's some *tension* between instability and stability, brokenness and wholeness—much as the speaker feels an internal tension between grief and exultation.

Frequent enjambment also gives the impression that this weary speaker is pausing to rest, or breathe, in the mid-sentence. The "short-windedness" of the verse gives it a slow, stately pace, appropriate to a meditation on age and loss.

Finally, enjambment helps emphasize some important words and phrases—usually at the ends of lines, but sometimes at the beginnings of lines, too. For example, enjambment stresses thematically important words such as "struggle," "strength," and "reconciled" at the ends of lines 5, 9, and 20:

> [...] I struggle
> not to stray.
> [...]
> before I can gather strength
> to proceed on my journey,
> [...]
> How shall the heart be reconciled
> to its feast of losses?

This makes sense, given that the whole poem is about the *struggle* to gather *strength* and *reconcile* oneself to loss.

Enjambment also stresses "dwindling" and "trailing" at the ends of lines 11 and 13:

> [...] milestones dwindling
> toward the horizon
> and the slow fires trailing
> from [...]

fittingly, these unpunctuated words seem to dwindle or trail off into air. But notice, too, how enjambment stresses "abides" at the beginning of line 5 (where the caesura following this word adds further emphasis):

> though some principle of being
> abides, from which I struggle

By delaying a key word till after the line break, it underscores the speaker's proud assertion that the core of his being *abides* (survives).

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 4-5:** "being / abides"
- **Lines 5-6:** "struggle / not"
- **Lines 8-9:** "look / before"
- **Lines 9-10:** "strength / to"
- **Lines 11-12:** "dwindling / toward"
- **Lines 12-13:** "horizon / and"
- **Lines 13-14:** "trailing / from"
- **Lines 15-16:** "angels / wheel"
- **Lines 17-18:** "tribe / out"
- **Lines 20-21:** "reconciled / to"
- **Lines 22-23:** "wind / the"
- **Lines 28-29:** "go / wherever"
- **Lines 30-31:** "road / precious"
- **Lines 33-34:** "covered / and"
- **Lines 35-36:** "voice / directed"
- **Lines 39-40:** "art / to"
- **Lines 41-42:** "chapter / in"
- **Lines 42-43:** "transformations / is"

END-STOPPED LINE

In addition to frequent enjambments, the poem contains many end-stopped lines—26 out of 44 lines, to be exact. The many line-ending commas and periods—plus the exclamation point in line 19 ("and my tribe is scattered!"), the question mark in line 21 ("to its feats of losses?"), and the colon in line 36 ("directed me:")—add to the poem's slow, deliberate pace.

That pace suits the poem's speaker, dramatic situation, and contemplative mood. The speaker is old, weary, and looking back wistfully back on his life before continuing his journey. The lines of his monologue are short, as if he's easily winded and needs to pause frequently. Punctuation helps emphasize many of these pauses.

One notable feature of the poem is that its sentences never stop mid-line. In other words, all of its sentence endings coincide with line endings. This feature gives "The Layers" an element of calm consistency; even though it's a free verse poem, its structure is fairly predictable, composed of sentences stacked up in orderly, stable "layers." This feature also makes the end of each sentence a little more emphatic—fittingly enough, since the poem is *about* endings.

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-3:** "I have walked through many lives, / some of them my own, / and I am not who I was,"
- **Line 6:** "not to stray."
- **Line 7:** "When I look behind,"
- **Line 10:** "to proceed on my journey,"
- **Line 14:** "from the abandoned camp-sites,"
- **Line 16:** "wheel on heavy wings."
- **Lines 18-19:** "out of my true affections, / and my tribe is scattered!"
- **Line 21:** "to its feast of losses?"
- **Lines 23-27:** "the manic dust of my friends, / those who fell along the way, / bitterly stings my face. / Yet I turn, I turn, / exulting somewhat,"
- **Line 29:** "wherever I need to go,"
- **Lines 31-32:** "precious to me. / In my darkest night,"
- **Line 34:** "and I roamed through wreckage,"
- **Lines 36-38:** "directed me: / "Live in the layers, / not on the litter.""
- **Line 40:** "to decipher it,"
- **Lines 43-44:** "is already written. / I am not done with my changes."

PERSONIFICATION

The poem contains either one or two examples of personification, depending on whether the "scavenger angels" count (lines 15-16). The speaker might be describing the kind of angels that appear in religious literature: divine, but human-shaped, creatures. Alternatively, he might be describing birds (especially scavenger birds, like vultures) by *comparing* them to angels. In that case, he would be comparing animals to something human-ish—and the image would fall somewhere in the neighborhood of personification.

A clearer example of personification occurs in lines 22-25. The speaker calls the windblown dust "manic" (frenzied, overexcited), thus assigning a human trait to something inanimate. But he takes the personification a step further by claiming that this dust actually *is* his dead friends—the remains of loved ones who "fell along the way." He complains that it "bitterly stings [his] face," as if the dust (friends) could resent having died and were actively seeking his attention or trying to hurt him.

Personification always blurs the line between the human and non-human, but here the line is especially blurry! This strange image makes clear that the speaker isn't walking through a normal desert; he's journeying through a psychological landscape—a projection of memory, emotion, and other human qualities.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Lines 15-16:** "over which scavenger angels / wheel on heavy wings."
- **Lines 22-25:** "In a rising wind / the manic dust of my friends, / those who fell along the way, / bitterly stings my face."

RHETORICAL QUESTION

The poem contains only one rhetorical question, but it's an

important one. In lines 20-21, the speaker asks:

> How shall the heart be reconciled
> to its feast of losses?

Like all rhetorical questions, this one is intended to make a point; it's not meant to be directly answered. In some sense, it *can't* be answered. Clearly, the speaker—who's looking back wistfully on his life's journey, and who still feels "bitterly [stung]" by the deaths of friends (line 25)—will never completely get over his sorrows. The abundance, or "feast," of loss is too great to allow a simple resolution. His "heart" will always grieve on some level.

Some rhetorical questions can be *indirectly* answered, however. In this case, the poem as a whole provides a kind of indirect answer to the speaker's question. The mystical advice to "Live in the layers, / not on the litter" (37-38) suggests how to cope with loss even if you never quite get over it.

The speaker's overall arc in the poem (grieving, then moving forward with the advice in mind) further suggests that total reconciliation isn't necessary. By recognizing the inevitability of change and the "precious[ness]" of what's still ahead (lines 30-31), even a sufferer of many losses can find the strength to keep going.

Where Rhetorical Question appears in the poem:

- **Lines 20-21:** "How shall the heart be reconciled / to its feast of losses?"

VOCABULARY

Abides (Lines 4-5) - Remains; survives.

Compelled (Line 8) - Obliged, forced (to do something).

Dwindling (Lines 11-12) - Diminishing, getting smaller; here, receding into the distance.

Scavenger angels (Lines 14-16) - This may refer to literal angels scavenging (feasting on leftovers and/or carrion) at the "camp-sites," or it may be a metaphor for birds doing the same.

Tribe (Lines 17-19) - A close-knit society or social circle. Here, the word suggests a close group of friends and loved ones rather than a broader society or ethnic group.

Manic (Lines 22-25) - Frenzied, wildly excited, or suffering from mania (a mood disorder causing excitable behavior). Here, the word metaphorically describes dust that's wildly blowing in the wind.

Exulting (Lines 26-27) - Rejoicing or triumphantly celebrating.

Wreckage (Line 34) - Pieces of something broken or destroyed (comparable to "litter" in line 38).

Nimbus-clouded (Lines 35-36) - Surrounded by a luminous cloud, like a god or saint in works of religious art. Metaphorically, the description suggests that the "voice / direct[ing]" the speaker sounded mystical and holy.

Litter (Lines 37-38) - Scattered trash or shattered remnants (like the "wreckage" mentioned in line 34).

Decipher (Lines 39-40) - Decode or interpret.

Art (Lines 39-40) - "Art" here means *skill* or *specialized knowledge*, but probably also implies *artistic ability* (since the poet is writing a work of literary art).

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"The Layers" doesn't follow any traditional form. It's a free verse poem, meaning that it has no consistent meter or rhyme scheme. Its lines are generally on the short side (three to eight syllables), and although there are 44 lines, they're not broken up into stanzas. Poems with lines of roughly equal length and no stanza breaks are sometimes called *stichic* (the opposite of *stanzaic*).

In subtle ways, these formal choices mirror the poem's subject and themes. The freedom from traditional structure seems to match the independence (and isolation) of a speaker who wanders his own path. The short lines cause the poem to lay its sentences out slowly, with frequent pauses and enjambments. As a result, the verse has a stately, measured pace; at times, it even seems to labor to move forward. This pace fits the journey of the aging speaker, who "struggle[s]" along his path and has to "gather strength / to proceed." But the absence of stanza breaks means that the verse never fully rests, either. Even if it seems to advance with difficulty, it keeps advancing—just like the speaker.

Finally, the combination of short lines, fairly high line count, and lack of stanza breaks gives "The Layers" a *tall* appearance on the page. This matters because it's a poem about layers! Its lines may be short and broken up, but there are a lot of them layered on top of each other—until they add up to a statement of real depth. In this way, the poem's form seems to reflect its metaphor about savoring life as a cumulative whole, appreciating its layers rather than getting hung up on its broken pieces.

METER

The poem is written in free verse, so it has no meter or rhyme scheme. However, most lines contain at least two and at most four strong stresses. Readers can see this range in lines 20-21:

> How shall the heart be reconciled
> to its feast of losses?

Line 20 has four strong stresses; line 21 has two. The number of stresses per line never varies wildly but never becomes predictable, either.

The freedom of the verse seems to match the independence of the speaker on his lonely journey. At the same time, neither he nor the verse has *total* freedom of movement. He's headed along a particular "road," not just roaming all over. Likewise, the verse stays within certain limits. Even its outline on the page looks rough, yet narrow.

RHYME SCHEME

As a free verse poem, "The Layers" has no rhyme scheme. It does have moments, though, where the endings of lines are clearly meant to parallel each other.

For example, both line 11 and line 13 end with "-ing" words: "dwindling" and "trailing." The way these words dangle out at the end of enjambed lines gives a trailing-off effect that matches their meaning. The way the "-ing" echoes from one line to the other, trailing down the page, subtly enhances this effect. (Notice how "being" in line 4 provides an earlier parallel.)

There's also an identical rhyme between "go" and "go" in lines 28-29:

> with my will intact to go
> wherever I need to go,

Why might the poet have chosen to draw attention to these lines through a type of rhyme? Notice that they're part of the crucial sentence in which the speaker, despite his grief, turns to look forward. By adding emphasis, the "go"/"go" repetition helps to convey the speaker's resolve, mark an important shift in the poem, and suggest that the need to keep *going* is one of the poem's key themes.

SPEAKER

Stanley Kunitz acknowledged that "The Layers" was "a summing-up poem," written specfically for a volume of his collected poems when he was in his 70s. It's fair to read the speaker, then, as a version of the poet, a man looking back on the "journey" of his life and career. However, there are no clear autobiographical details in the poem, so the speaker can also be read as a more generalized figure coping with old age, grief, and loss.

Since Kunitz has linked the poem with his own life, this guide refers to the speaker as "he," but the speaker's gender isn't specified in the poem. Neither is the speaker's profession, nor the origin or destination of his "journey." In fact, this appears to be an allegorical journey—the journey of life—taken across a landscape in which everything is symbolic. For example, the "milestones" seem to represent landmarks in the speaker's life; "abandoned camp-sites" represent past homes (or other gathering places for his loved ones), and so on.

As the opening lines make clear, the speaker is old and weary. He's accumulated vast life experience and gone through many changes of identity. His claim to have experienced "many lives, / some of them my own" can be read metaphorically: that is, he's old enough to *feel* that he's lived multiple lifetimes, only some of which seem related to his current identity. (However, the later detail of the "scavenger angels" raises the possibility that this poem takes place in a supernatural setting, one that allows for reincarnation, memories of past lives, etc.) Throughout his changes of identity, some central "principle of being"—some core truth of existence—has remained a constant for him, and he tries to adhere to it rather than losing his original self completely.

The speaker feels that looking back at his past will help him "gather strength / to proceed on his journey." Basically, he needs to do the work of mourning in order to move on. As he's passed various milestones and "abandoned" various meaningful places ("camp-sites"), he's also lost a "tribe" of meaningful people, those who earned his "true affections." He's grieving for dead "friends," whose "dust" (ashes) he seems to feel blowing in his face. He's having trouble coping with, or "reconcil[ing]" himself, to this abundance ("feast") of loss.

Still, by the end of the poem, the speaker is moving on—even "exulting somewhat" (rejoicing slightly) at the fact that his journey isn't over. He recalls a bit of mystical advice ("Live in the layers, / not on the litter") that helped him focus on the fullness of his experience, not just the loss it's left him with. He claims not to understand this advice—a detail that perhaps separates him slightly from the poet who wrote it! Still, he seems to absorb its wisdom. He accepts the necessity of loss and change and prepares to move on—to face "the next chapter / in my book of transformations." Of course, this next transformation might be his own death. (Notice, too, how the reference to "my book" links the speaker back to the poet.)

SETTING

The poem is set in what appears to be a symbolic landscape. Its speaker "journey[s]" along the "road" of experience, looking back on life's fading "milestones" before "turn[ing]" to go on. Although this setting *could* be read as partly literal—a road through some kind of desert wasteland—the poem's obviously non-literal details discourage that reading from the start. The speaker has "walked through many lives," sees "scavenger angels" over the sites he's passed and feels the "dust" of dead friends blowing in the wind around him. This certainly sounds like an allegorical journey toward death!

All the features of this setting suggest clear symbolic possibilities. The "milestones," which *could* be literal mile-

markers, also represent landmark events in the speaker's life. The "abandoned camp-sites" may represent former homes, or gathering places, that mattered to the speaker and his "tribe" of loved ones. The still-burning "fires" may suggest the warmth he still feels for these places—they haven't gone cold in his "affections"—yet the "scavenger angels" flying over them suggest that they're lost forever. (Scavengers feed on dead things and leftovers. "Scavenger angels" might itself be a metaphor for birds—especially "heavy" ones like vultures—that feed on dead animals, or on scraps of food left by other creatures. It could also evoke ominous figures from myth and religion, like the Angel of Death.)

Even the roadside dust that blows into the speaker's face is "the manic dust of my friends, / those who fell along the way." It's unlikely that this dust is *literally* the ashes of his dead friends, but it does evoke their deaths.

Likewise, the details in lines 32-36 are full of symbolism:

> In my darkest night,
> when the moon was covered
> and I roamed through wreckage,
> a nimbus-clouded voice
> directed me:

The "darkest night" suggests a low point in the speaker's journey, when he'd suffered so much loss that his life felt shattered and worthless, like "wreckage" or "litter." The "covered" moon suggests that he couldn't find any spiritual illumination, comfort, or direction. (These images recall the phrase "dark night of the soul," and Kunitz may be alluding to the source of that expression: *La noche oscura del alma* or "Dark Night of the Soul," a 16th-century poem by St. John of the Cross.) The "nimbus-clouded voice"—some sort of holy presence that addresses the speaker, as if through a mist or luminous halo—offers yet another clue that the poem isn't set in the everyday world. Rather, the landscape is a reflection of the speaker's psyche or soul as he journeys through life.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Stanley Kunitz (1905-2006) called "The Layers" a "summing-up poem"—a kind of poem that summed up his life and career. He wrote it for *The Poems of Stanley Kunitz*, a "collected" volume spanning the first 50 years of his career (1928-1978). When that volume appeared, Kunitz was 73 years old and had recently served a term as Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress—the position now known as U.S. Poet Laureate. Little did he know that he would live until the age of 100 and serve as Poet Laureate again in the 21st century!

Although he was part of the American literary scene for over 70 years, Kunitz was not closely associated with a particular poetic school or movement. He enjoyed a long creative friendship with Theodore Roethke; the two poets influenced each other's work, and Kunitz called Roethke "[t]he poet of my generation who meant most to me." Like Kunitz's stepfather, Roethke died relatively young of a heart attack; he may well be one of the "friends" mourned in "The Layers."

The free verse of "The Layers" is part of a broader shift in Kunitz's work, from strict metrical forms in his early career to freer forms in his later poems. A number of well-known American poets underwent a similar shift in the mid-20th century, including James Wright, Adrienne Rich, and Gwendolyn Brooks.

By the time "The Layers" was published, Kunitz was already a well-recognized and decorated author, having won a Pulitzer Prize in 1959 for his *Selected Poems, 1928-1958*. Almost two decades after "The Layers" and the book it first appeared in, another "summing-up" collection of Kunitz's work, *Passing Through: The Later Poems, New and Selected*, won the National Book Award for Poetry in 1995.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Kunitz's life began with loss: his father, a struggling dressmaker, died by suicide shortly before Kunitz was born. Later, his stepfather died of a heart attack when Kunitz was a teenager. His biological father's suicide, as well as fatherhood, heritage, and grief in general, became recurring subjects in his poetry.

By the time this poem was written, Kunitz had already lived through the better part of 20th-century history, including two world wars, the Great Depression, and the political and cultural upheaval of the 1960s. Indirectly, then, the poem might reflect the "feast of losses" Kunitz had witnessed throughout that turbulent century.

By the late 1970s, Kunitz had also lost some personal literary and artistic friends, including the poet Theodore Roethke and the painter Mark Rothko. More broadly, many celebrated American poets had died suddenly, often under tragic circumstances, during the previous two decades: Sylvia Plath, Delmore Schwartz, Randall Jarrell, John Berryman, Anne Sexton, and Robert Lowell among them.

Kunitz's closeness with these poets varied, but he was deeply involved in the poetry community as a whole (for example, he founded or co-founded two venerable literary institutions: Poets House in New York City and the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown, Massachusetts). Thus, his elegy for "friends [...] who fell along the way" might encompass some of these famous writers, and mark a troubled chapter in literary history.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Poem Out Loud — Watch a video of Stanley Kunitz reading "The Layers." (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wk6xW41EFoA)
- Kunitz's Life and Work — Read a short biography of Stanley Kunitz, plus other Kunitz poems, at the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/stanley-kunitz)
- Kunitz as Poet Laureate — Check out the Library of Congress's "Resource Guide" on former U.S. Poet Laureate Stanley Kunitz. (https://guides.loc.gov/poet-laureate-stanley-kunitz)
- An Interview With the Poet — Watch an interview with Kunitz conducted by poet Gregory Orr. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KGmzr1kGeoQ)

HOW TO CITE

MLA

Allen, Austin. "*The Layers*." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 13 Jul 2021. Web. 19 Aug 2021.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Allen, Austin. "*The Layers*." LitCharts LLC, July 13, 2021. Retrieved August 19, 2021. https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/stanley-kunitz/the-layers.