Essay 3

Write a multi-paragraph essay of approximately 300 words. Select ONE of the following three essay topics.

**CHOICE # 1: Responding to Poetry**

Discuss the extended metaphor of a ship’s journey in the poem “The Writer” by Richard Wilbur. Be sure to make reference to the work in your response.

**The Writer By Richard Wilbur**

In her room at the prow of the house

Where light breaks, and the windows are tossed with linden¹,

My daughter is writing a story.

I pause in the stairwell, hearing

From her shut door a commotion of typewriter-keys

Like a chain hauled over a gunwale.

Young as she is, the stuff

Of her life is a great cargo, and some of it heavy:

I wish her a lucky passage.

But now it is she who pauses,
As if to reject my thought and its easy figure.
A stillness greatens, in which

The whole house seems to be thinking,
And then she is at it again with a bunched clamor
Of strokes, and again is silent.

I remember the dazed starling
Which was trapped in that very room, two years ago;
How we stole in, lifted a sash

And retreated, not to affright it;
And how for a helpless hour, through the crack of the door,
We watched the sleek, wild, dark

And irridescent creature
Batter against the brilliance, drop like a glove
To the hard floor, or the desk-top,

And wait then, humped and bloody,
For the wits to try it again; and how our spirits
Rose when, suddenly sure,

It lifted off from a chair-back,

Beating a smooth course for the right window

And clearing the sill of the world.

It is always a matter, my darling,

Or life or death, as I had forgotten. I wish

What I wished you before, but harder.

1. linden: an ornamental tree with heart-shaped leaves and fragrant flowers

**CHOICE # 2: Responding to Prose**

Discuss the character of the narrator of “My Neighborhood” by Alfred Kazin. Be sure to make reference to the work in your response.

**CHOICE # 3: Responding to Prose**

Discuss the narrator’s contrasting feelings about the neighborhood of his youth. Be sure to make reference to the work in your response.

**My Neighborhood by Alfred Kazin**

The block; *my* block. It was on the Chester Street side of our house, between the grocery and the back wall of the old drugstore, that I was hammered into the shape of the streets. Everything beginning at Blake Avenue would always wear for me some delightful strangeness and mildness simply because it was not of my block, *the* block, where the clang of your head sounded against the pavement when you fell in a fist fight, and the rows of store lights on each side were pitiless, watching you. Anything away from the block was good: even a school you never went to, two blocks away; there were vegetable gardens in the park across the
street. Returning from “New York,” I would take the longest routes home from the subway, get off a station ahead of our own, only for the unexpectedness of walking through Betsy Head Park and hearing the gravel crunch under my feet as I went beyond the vegetable gardens, smelling the sweaty sweet dampness from the pool in summer and the dust on the leaves as I passed under the ailanthus trees. On the block itself everything rose up only to test me.

We worked every inch of it, from the cellars and the backyards to the sickening space between the roofs. Any wall, any stoop, any curving metal edge on a billboard sign made a place against which to knock a ball; any sewer cover a base; any crack in the pavement a “net” for the tense sharp tennis that we played by beating a soft ball back and forth with our hands between the squares. Betsy Head Park two blocks away would always feel slightly foreign, for it belonged to the Amboys and the Bristols and the Hopkinsons as much as it did to us. Our life every day was fought out on the pavement and in the gutter, up against the walls of the houses and the glass fronts of the drugstore and the grocery, in and out of the fresh steaming piles of horse manure, the wheels of the passing carts and automobiles, along the iron spikes of the stairway to the cellar, the jagged edge of the open garbage cans, the crumbly steps of the old farmhouses still left on the side of the street.

As I go back to the block now, and for a moment fold my body up again in its narrow arena – there, just there, between the back of the asphalt and the old women in their kerchiefs and flowered housedresses sitting on the tawny kitchen chairs – the back wall of the drugstore still rises up to test me. Every day we smashed a small black viciously hard regulation handball against it with fanatical cuts and drives and slams, beating and slashing at it almost in hatred for the blind strength of the wall itself. I was never good enough at handball, was always practicing some trick shot that might earn me esteem, and when I was weary of trying, would often bat a ball down Chester Street just to get myself to Blake Avenue. I have this memory of playing one-o’ cat by myself in the sleepy twilight, at a moment when everyone else had left the block. The sparrows floated down from the telephone wires to peck at every fresh pile of horse manure, and there was the smell of brine from the delicatessen store, of egg crates and of the milk scum left in the great metal cans outside the grocery, of the thick white paste oozing out from behind the fresh Hecker’s Flour ad on the metal signboard. I would throw the ball in the air, hit it with my bat, then with perfect satisfaction drop the bat to the ground and run to the next sewer cover. Over and over I did this, from sewer cover to sewer cover, until I had worked my way to Blake Avenue and could see the park.
With each clean triumphant bang of my bat against the ball, it was leading me on, I did the whole length of our block up and down, and never knew how happy I was just watching the asphalt rise and fall, the curve of the steps up to an old farmhouse. The farmhouses themselves were streaked red on one side, brown on the other, but the steps themselves were always grey. There was a tremor of pleasure at one place; I held my breath in nausea for another. As I ran after my ball with the bat heavy in my hand, the odd cobblestoned yards into the old farmhouses, where stray chickens still waddled along the stones; past the little candy store where we went only if the big one on our side of the block was out of Eskimo Pies; past the three neighboring tenements where the last of the old women sat on their kitchen chairs yawning before they went up to make supper. Then came Mrs. Rosenwasser’s house, the place on the block I first identified with what was farthest from home, and strangest, because it was a “private” house; then the fences around the monument works, where black cranes rose up above the yard and you could see the smooth grey slabs that would be cut and carved into tombstones, some of them already engraved with the names and dates and family virtues of the dead.

Beyond Blake Avenue was the pool parlor outside which we waited all through the tense September afternoons of the World Series to hear the latest scores called off the ticker tape – and where as we waited, banging a ball against the bottom of the wall and drinking water out of empty coke bottles, I breathed the chalk off the cues and listened to the clocks ringing in the fire station across the street. There was an old warehouse next to the pool parlor; the oil on the barrels and the iron staves had the same rusty smell. A block away was the park, thick with the dusty gravel I liked to hear my shoes crunch in as I ran round and round the track; then a great open pavilion, the inside mysteriously dark, chill even in summer; there I would wait in the sweaty coolness before pushing on to the wading pool where they put up a shower on the hottest days.

Beyond the park the “fields” began, all those still unused lots where we could still play hard ball in perfect peace – first shooing away the goats and then tearing up goldenrod before laying our bases. The smell and touch of those “fields”, with their wild compost under the billboards of weeds, goldenrod, bricks, goat droppings, rusty cans, empty beer bottles, fresh new lumber, and damp cement, lives in my mind as Brownsville’s great open door, the wastes that took us through to the west. I used to go around them in summer with my cousins selling near-beer to the carpenters, but always in a daze, would stare so long at the fibrous stalks of
the goldenrod as I felt their harshness in my hand that I would forget to make a
sale, and usually go off sick on the beer I drank up
myself. Beyond! Beyond! Only to see something new, to get away from each
day’s narrow battleground between the grocery and the back wall of the
drugstore! Even the other end of our block, when you got to Mrs. Rosenwasser’s
house and the monument works, was dear to me for the contrast. On summer
nights, when we played Indian trail, running away from each other on prearranged
signals, the greatest moment came when I could plunge into the darkness down the
block for myself and hide behind the slabs in the monument works. I remember
the air whistling around me as I ran, the panicky thud of my bones in my sneakers,
and then the slabs rising in the light from the street lamps as I sped past the little
candy store and crept under the fence.

In the darkness you could never see where the crane began. We like to trap the
enemy between the slabs and sometimes jumped them from great mounds of rock
in the quarry. A boy once fell to his death that way, and they put a watchman there
to keep us out. This made the slabs all the more impressive to me, and I always
aimed first for that yard whenever we played follow-the-leader. Day after day the
monument works became oppressively more mysterious and remote, though it was
only just down the block; I stood in front of it every afternoon on my way back
from school, filling it with my fears. It was not death I felt there – the slabs were
usually faceless. It was the darkness itself, and the wind howling around whenever
I stood poised on the edge of high slab waiting to jump. Then I would take in,
along with the fear, some amazement of joy that I had found my way out that far.