

SUMMING UP THE POEM

- The speaker of the poem has a body that is like a rounded stone.
- Its head is like a short snake.
- The speaker can retract its head, and its legs come out of their sleeves.
- The speaker is always at home, traveling with its house.
- It floats on the lake and rests in the dust. Its flesh lives tenderly within.

LITERARY COMPONENTS

► Note the important furtherance of the existential and experiential world of this entity, living separate, in a shell, through the repeated use of the words *My* and *I*. The word *my* is used nine times; the word *I*, twice.

► **Consonance; Alliteration:** repetition of the **s** sound

► **Metaphor:** *body a rounded stone, head a short snake, eyelids are clamps*

► **Rhyme:** *stone...bone, within...chin*

► **Assonance:** *seams...sleeves, shrink within...chin, eyelids...quick*

► **Alliteration:** *quick clamps*

► **Repetition:** *stone...smooth*

► **Alliteration:** *floats...flesh*

► **Consonance:** *rests...dust*

► **Assonance:** *rests...flesh*

► **Syllabification:** In the last five lines, all the words are of one syllable, except for *within* and *inside*, which are compound prepositions that have the sound of two single-syllable words, and the three-syllable *tenderly*. This gives the word great importance.

ANALYZING THE POEM

Living Tenderly is a beautifully written, careful poem. That it is a riddle poem is really secondary, an intellectual diversion. *Living Tenderly* gives us the inner mind of the turtle.

The turtle-speaker's observations and philosophy are basic, simple, and careful. This outlook makes sense for a creature that has been repeatedly slaughtered, and is now on the list of endangered species. The speaker's predominate use of monosyllables not only echoes its lumbering gait—its language is what we can expect from a being who dwells within a shell. Its body never has direct contact with the outside world, except for its feet. *Living Tenderly* is the experience of an encased entity that is encased and yet completely vulnerable, once its shell is broken. The tortoise always lives apart, even from its own kind, until it becomes dust.

Living Tenderly

May Swenson

- My body a rounded stone
with a pattern of smooth seams.
My head a short snake,
retractive,¹ projective.²
- 5 My legs come out of their sleeves
or shrink within,
and so does my chin.
My eyelids are quick clamps.
My back is my roof.
- 10 I am always at home.
I travel where my house walks.
It is a smooth stone.
It floats within the lake,
or rests in the dust.
- 15 My flesh lives tenderly
inside its bone.

1. **retractive** (rih TRAK tiv) *adj.*: capable of being drawn back inside
2. **projective** (pruh JEK tiv) *adj.*: moving forward and outward

502 ~ Unit 4

GUIDING THE READING

LITERAL

Q. What is the speaker's body like?

A. A rounded stone with a pattern of smooth seams.

Q. With what does the speaker compare its head?

A. A short snake.

Q. What is the speaker's roof?

A. The speaker's back is its roof.

ANALYTICAL

Q. What (for humans) is unusual about the speaker's head?

A. Its head can be retracted and projected.

Q. What is unusual about the speaker's legs?

A. The speaker's legs come out or shrink within.