

Homeless
Anna Quindlen

Read carefully and annotate
using the guide provided.

Her name was Ann, and we met in the Port Authority Bus Terminal several Januaries ago. I was doing a story on homeless people. She said I was wasting my time talking to her; she was just passing through, although she'd been passing through for more than two weeks. To prove to me that this was true, she rummaged through a tote bag and a manila envelope and finally unfolded a sheet of typing paper and brought out her photographs.

They were not pictures of family, or friends, or even a dog or cat, its eyes brown-red in the flashbulb's light. They were pictures of a house. It was like a thousand houses in a hundred towns, not suburb, not city, but somewhere in between, with aluminum siding and a chain-link fence, a narrow driveway running up to a one-car garage and a patch of back yard. The house was yellow. I looked on the back for a date or a name, but neither was there. There was no need for discussion. I knew what she was trying to tell me, for it was something I had often felt. She was not adrift, alone, anonymous, although her bags and her raincoat with the grime shadowing its creases had made me believe she was. She had a house, or at least once upon a time had had one. Inside were curtains, a couch, a stove, potholders. You are where you live. She was somebody.

I've never been very good at looking at the big picture, taking the global view, and I've always been a person with an overactive sense of place, the legacy of an Irish grandfather. So it is natural that the thing that seems most wrong with the world to me right now is that there are so many people with no homes. I'm not simply talking about shelter from the elements or three square meals a day or a mailing address to which the welfare people can send the check—although I know that all these are important for survival. I'm talking about a home, about precisely those kinds of feelings that have wound up in cross-stitch and French knots on samplers over the years.

Home is where the heart is. There's no place like it. I love my home with a ferocity totally out of proportion to its appearance or location. I love dumb things about it: the hot-water heater, the plastic rack you drain dishes in, the roof over my head, which occasionally leaks. And yet it is precisely those dumb things that make it what it is—a place of certainty, stability, predictability, privacy, for me and for my family. It is where I live. What more can you say about a place than that? That is everything.

Yet it is something that we have been edging away from gradually during my lifetime and the lifetimes of my parents and grandparents. There was a time when where you lived often was where you worked and where you grew the food you ate and even where you were buried. When that era passed, where you lived at least was where your parents had lived and where you would live with your children when you became enfeebled. Then, suddenly, where you lived was where you lived for three years, until you could move on to something else and something else again.

And so we have come to something else again, to children who do not understand what it means to go to their rooms because they have never had a room, to men and women whose fantasy is a wall they can paint a color of their own choosing, to old people reduced to sitting on molded-plastic chairs, their skin blue-white in the lights of a bus station, who pull pictures of houses out of their bags. Homes have stopped being homes. Now they are real estate.

People find it curious that those without homes would rather sleep sitting up on benches or huddled in doorways than go to shelters. Certainly some prefer to do so because they are emotionally ill, because they

have been locked in before and they are damned if they will be locked in again. Others are afraid of the violence and trouble they may find there. But some seem to want something that is not available in shelters, and they will not compromise, not for a cot, or oatmeal, or a shower with special soap that kills the bugs. "One room," a woman with a baby who was sleeping on her sister's floor once told me, "painted blue." That was the crux of it: not size or location, but pride of ownership. Painted blue.

This is a difficult problem, and some wise and compassionate people are working hard at it. But in the main I think we work around it, just as we walk around it when it is lying on the sidewalk or sitting in the bus terminal—the problem, that is. It has been customary to take people's pain and lessen our own participation in it by turning it into an issue, not a collection of human beings. We turn an adjective into a noun: the poor, not poor people; the homeless, not Ann or the man who lives in the box or the woman who sleeps on the subway grate.

Sometimes I think we would be better off if we forgot about the broad strokes and concentrated on the details. Here is a woman without a bureau. There is a man with no mirror, no wall to hang it on. They are not the homeless. They are people who have no homes. No drawer that holds the spoons. No window to look out upon the world. My God. That is everything.

Making Meanings

First Thoughts

All classes answer # 1-6. Also, choose two to answer using A.C.E. format.

1. Which facts or opinions in Quindlen's essay did you find most important or significant or disturbing?

Shaping Interpretations

2. What do you think was Quindlen's motive in writing this essay?

3. What do you think Quindlen wants the reader to do or to believe when she says, "It has been customary to take people's pain and lessen our own participation in it by turning it into an issue, not a collection of human beings"?

4. Suppose you were reorganizing the selections in this book. Look at the titles of the collections. Could Quindlen's essay fit somewhere else? Why or why not?

5. Use a list like the one below to describe all the persuasive techniques Quindlen uses in her essay. Which ones do you think are the most powerful?

- States facts
- Quotes statistics
- States opinions
- Talks about real people
- Relates issues to readers' lives
- Reveals feelings
- Shows the historical context

Challenging the Text

6. Quindlen believes that homelessness is a major problem. Her source is a series of interviews. Do you think interviews are a credible source? Are they enough, or are statistics also necessary? Give your reasons.

7. What do you think of Quindlen's choice of homelessness as "the thing that seems most wrong with the world to me right now"? What seems most wrong in the world to you?

8. The media is often criticized for intruding on people's private lives or making news out of people's suffering. What do you think of these criticisms? Do you think journalists like Quindlen perform a public service by writing articles like this one, or do you think people like Ann should be left alone? Share your opinions with other readers.

Honors only

Choose #7 or #8.
Write a 1 page response

Choices: Building Your Portfolio

Writer's Notebook

1. Collecting Ideas for a Persuasive Essay

Supporting your opinion. Remember that you can't prove an opinion. The closest you can come is to support your opinion with overwhelmingly convincing evidence. Examples, anecdotes, statistics, and quotations from experts are kinds of evidence that you can use to persuade your readers. You should have a list of possible topics for a persuasive essay for the Writer's Workshop found in this collection. Select a topic you have especially strong feelings about and collect some evidence to support your opinion.

Expressing an Opinion

2. This Is Just to Say

How did Anna Quindlen's essay affect you? Did it change your thinking or feelings about homelessness? Will it affect your actions? Let the author know. Write a letter to Quindlen, sharing your thoughts about her essay and the problem of homelessness.

Social History/Speaking and Listening

3. Speaking Up

What problems do you see in this country, in your community, or in your school that you feel people are "working around"? Take a stand on one issue and make notes on what you think should be done. Then present your ideas in a brief, informal report to the class. Be sure to state your opinion clearly and back it up.

Social History/Speaking and Listening

4. What to Do?

Homelessness hasn't gone away; in many cities, it's increased. With a group, brainstorm three possible reasons for homelessness and then discuss possible solutions. See if you can reach a consensus (agreement among everybody). Share your ideas with the class.

COMPLETE

