“Father and Child” by Gwen Harwood
(from Lines to Time p. 298)

1 BARN OWL

Daybreak: the household slept.
I rose, blessed by the sun.
A horny fiend, I crept
out with my father’s gun.
Let him dream of a child
obedient, angel-mild-
old No-Sayer, robbed of power
by sleep. I knew my prize
who swooped home at this hour
with daylight-riddled eyes
to his high place on a high beam
in our old stables, to dream
light’s useless time away.
I stood, holding my breath,
in urine-scented hay,
master of life and death,
a wisp-haired judge whose law
would punish beak and claw.

Title clearly indicates what the poem is about – the changing dimension of a father and child’s relationship (Step 1)

Action takes place early in the morning. (Step 1)

Daybreak signifies an important event in the narrator’s childhood. (Steps 1 & 2)

Deliberate contrast – devilish description of child’s intended actions versus father’s angelic vision of child. (Step 8)

A mood of anticipation and excitement is also created in the opening stanzas through the description of possible actions about to take place. (Step 2)

Represents the child as a judge, but highlights immaturity. (Step 8)

Rhyme scheme – ab,ab,cc. Creates momentum for the reader but does not have a ‘sing song’ effect ie. sound contrived when the poem is read aloud. (Steps 9 & 10)

Language is deliberately brief (ie. short line lengths) and figurative as opposed to literal. Rhyming adds emphasis. (Steps 7 & 10)
My first shot struck. He swayed, ruined, beating his only wing, as I watched, afraid by the fallen gun, a lonely child who believed death clean and final, not this obscene bundle of stuff that dropped, and dribbled through loose straw tangling in bowels, and hopped blindly closer. I saw those eyes that did not see mirror my cruelty while the wrecked thing that could not bear the light nor hide hobbled in its own blood. My father reached my side, gave me the fallen gun.

"End what you have begun."

I fired. The black eyes shone once into mine, and slept. I leaned my head upon my father’s arm, and wept, owl-blind in early sun for what I had begun.
Forty years, lived or dreamed: what memories pack them home. **Now the season that seemed incredible is come.**

Father and child, we stand in time’s long-promised land.

Since there’s no more to taste ripeness is plainly all.

**Father, we pick our last fruits of the temporal.**

Eighty years old, you take this late walk for my sake.

Contrast to Part 1 of the poem, metaphoric description about the narrator’s father who is about to die. *(Steps 5 & 8)*

Never anticipated the death of a parent as a child. *(Step 1 & 2)*

Both references to the impending death of the narrator’s father from old age. (“temporal” refers to real physical world) *(Step 8)*
Who can be what you were?  
**Link your dry hand in mine,**  
**my stick-thin comforter.**  
Far distant suburbs shine  
with great simplicities.  
Birds crowd in flowering trees,  
sunset exalts its known  
symbols of **TRANSIENCE.**  
Your passionate face is grown  
to ancient innocence.  
**LET US WALK FOR THIS HOUR**  
**AS IF DEATH HAD NO POWER**  
or were no more than sleep.  
Things truly named can never  
vanish from earth. You keep  
a **child's delight** for ever  
in birds, flowers, shivery-grass-  
I name them as we pass.

Unlike in Part 1, the child is now leading her father. *(Step 5)*

The poem is at times didactic – explaining to the reader – the meaning of its symbolic imagery. *(Step 8)*

Emphasis through imagery on role reversal. *(Step 8)*

Constant reference to the passing of time as inevitable, creates a sad tone. Language is quite formal, indicating seriousness *(Steps 3 & 7)*
“Be your tears wet?” You speak as if air touched a string near breaking-point. Your cheek brushes on mine. **Old king,** your marvellous journey’s done. Your night and day are one.

as you find with your white stick the path on which you turn home with the child once quick to mischief, grown to learn what sorrows, in the end, no words, no tears can mend.

Tone is confessional and sad, as poem recounts a childhood experience and how it affects the narrator's life.

Imagery emphasizes the fragility/transient of this conversation between aged father and child. *(Step 8)*

Reference to Shakespeare’s *King Lear*, who goes mad and is only loved by his youngest daughter *(Step 8)*

Use of commas to make the reader pause – creates rhythm and draws attention to the grief to come. *(Steps 3, 5 & 9)*

Final statement is a summary of the narrator’s realizations about life and death. *(Step 1)*