larger lifetime. For that reason, children see a play such as Peter Pan very differently than adults do. Like adults, children may very well understand the appeal of Peter, the boy who never grows up. What they may miss in the play, however, is the sadness that tinges Never Land. Peter, finally, can become Eternal Boy only by forgetting—by forgetting those he loves and those he hates. Go to the window as often as he may, he can never fully enter the home and become part of a real family. He is excluded by his exemption from mortality—his exemption from being human. He is Eternal Boy only because he is not really a human boy at all.

Watching real children at play, adults may be both charmed and saddened by the child’s eagerness to grow up. Even more intense may be the adult’s mixture of nostalgia and dread as the child reaches puberty, that rather precarious border between childhood and adulthood. That very preciosity may, in part, be behind the message of a folk tale such as Little Red Riding Hood—a folk tale that presents us with a charming little girl but also makes us all too aware of the potential seductions of a “wolf.” We see Little Red Riding Hood with the double vision of adulthood, the vision that allows us to see the girl and the potential woman in one. What may seem like a “nursery tale” to a child holds warning implications to the knowing adult.

In addition to the moral complexities that come with sexual maturity, physical maturation carries within it the seeds of mortality. To reproduce—or to have the capability to reproduce—is to perpetuate one’s species and one’s self in future generations. At the same time, in a sense, it is also to die. If that seems fanciful, think of the many animals who die once offspring have been produced. Similarly, it is no accident that, during the Renaissance, “to die” also meant to have sexual intercourse, for the act of intercourse was thought literally to shorten one’s life. The birth of a child is the birth of new life. Inherently in that new life, however, is death itself. Not only do we begin to die as soon as we are born, but with each new generation the older generations find themselves displaced, pushed closer to the grave. Such is the recognition the young father and poet Donald Hall came to on the birth of his son:

DONALD HALL (1928- )  
My son, my executioner  
1955

My son, my executioner,  
I take you in my arms,  
Quiet and small and just astir,  
And whom my body warms.

Sweet death, small son, our instrument  
Of immortality,  
Your cries and hungers document  
Our bodily decay.

We twenty-five and twenty-two,  
Who seemed to live forever,  
Observe enduring life in you  
And start to die together.

The infant son is both “Sweet death” and “our instrument / Of immortality.” The generations march forward into seeming perpetuity, but the cycle of life depends not only on birth but also on death.

The recognition that one will die may be said to be a defining recognition of adulthood. That doesn’t mean, however, that death defines life. It is only part of the definition. In this chapter, you will be reading works that look at all the stages of life: at childhood, adolescence, adulthood, old age, and death. Often the writers will draw clear demarcations between these stages. The adult may feel the pull of nostalgia, that sweet and sad looking back to the past, especially to the joys of lost childhood. Some great lesson may signal a “coming of age,” the coming of emotional maturity. Writers such as Emily Dickinson may even imagine what it feels like to die—whereas other poets look at what they hope will be remembered of them after death.

Though writers often focus on one stage or another, the boundaries between the parts of life are not fully distinct. The child may play at being an adult—but the adult may also play at being a child. One might say, in fact, that the adult still is a child, for the child’s body and mind have been dissolved into the adult’s. We are told that nothing is ever forgotten, that our minds hold all our memories and experiences, if only we could remember to remember them. As adults, we are still the children we once were, for better or worse. Psychologists tell us that many adults continue throughout their lives to act out their childhood patterns, to respond to bosses or other authority figures as they responded to parents, or to seek mates who will help them reenact their parents’ marriages, or to interact with peers as the Older Sister or the Little Brother. If at some level we remain the children we were, we also become the adults we knew. Many a middle-aged person has been startled to see staring out of the mirror the face of a parent. We see such child/adult confusion in E. B. White’s “Once More to the Lake”: as an adult White brings his son to a camp where he had spent his own boyhood summers. As they reenact his childhood summers, White becomes both the child he was and the father he had, child and adult at once.

As each of us passes through the stages of life, the lines between the stages, between child and adult, son or daughter and parent, thus blur. As you look at the chapter’s frontispiece, you may see the skull or you may see the young lady looking in the mirror. Once you recognize the optical illusion, however, you will see both, for the skull has always existed in the young lady, just as the young lady exists in the skull.

AN ALBUM OF RETELLINGS
Childhood and Innocence: Little Red Riding Hood

CHARLES PERRAULT (1628-1703)
Little Red Riding Hood  
1697

Once upon a time there was a little village girl, the prettiest that had ever been seen. Her mother doted on her. Her grandmother was even fonder, and made her a little red hood, which became her so well that everywhere she went by the name of Little Red Riding Hood.
One day her mother, who had just made and baked some cakes, said to her: "Go and see how your grandmother is, for I have been told that she is ill. Take a cake and this little pot of butter."

Little Red Riding Hood set off at once for the house of her grandmother, who lived in another village.

On her way through a wood she met old Father Wolf. He would have very much liked to eat her, but dared not do so on account of some wood-cutters who were in the forest. He asked her where she was going. The poor child, not knowing that it was dangerous to stop and listen to a wolf, said:

"I am going to see my grandmother, and am taking her a cake and a pot of butter which my mother has sent her."

"Does she live far away?" asked the Wolf.

"Oh, yes," replied Little Red Riding Hood; "it is yonder by the mill which you can see right below there, and it is the first house in the village."

"Well now," said the Wolf, "I think I shall go and see her too. I will go by this path, and you by that path, and we will see who gets there first."

The Wolf set off running with all his might by the shorter road, and the little girl continued on her way by the longer road. As she went she amused herself by gathering nuts, running after the butterflies, and making nosegays of the wild flowers which she found.

The Wolf was not long in reaching the grandmother's house.

He knocked. Toc Toc.

"Who is there?"

"It is your granddaughter, Red Riding Hood," said the Wolf, disguising his voice, "and I bring you a cake and a little pot of butter as a present from my mother."

The worthy grandmother was in bed, not being very well, and cried out to him:

"Pull out the peg and the latch will fall."

The Wolf drew out the peg and the door flew open. Then he sprang upon the poor old lady and ate her up in less than no time, for he had been more than three days without food.

After that he shut the door, lay down in the grandmother's bed, and waited for Little Red Riding Hood.

Presently she came and knocked. Toc Toc.

"Who is there?"

Now Little Red Riding Hood on hearing the Wolf's gruff voice was at first frightened, but thinking that her grandmother had a bad cold, she replied:

"It is your granddaughter, Red Riding Hood, and I bring you a cake and a little pot of butter from my mother."

Softening his voice, the Wolf called out to her:

"Pull out the peg and the latch will fall."

Little Red Riding Hood drew out the peg and the door flew open.

When she saw her enter, the Wolf hid himself in the bed beneath the counterpane.

"Put the cake and the little pot of butter on the bin," he said, "and come up on the bed with me."

Little Red Riding Hood took off her clothes and climbed into the bed. She was astonished to see what her grandmother looked like in her nightgown.

"Grandmother," she said, "What big arms you have!"

"The better to hug you with, my child."

"Grandmother, what big legs you have!"

"The better to run with, my child."

"Grandmother, what big ears you have!"

"The better to hear with, my child."

"Grandmother, what big eyes you have!"

"The better to see with, my child."

"Grandmother, what big teeth you have!"

"The better to eat you with!"

Upon saying these words, the wicked Wolf threw himself on Little Red Riding Hood and gobbled her up.

Moral

From this story one learns that children, especially young girls,

Pretty, well-bred, and genteel,

Are wrong to listen to just anyone,

And it's not all strange,

If a wolf ends up eating them.

I say a Wolf, but not all wolves

Are exactly the same.

Some are perfectly charming,

Not loud, brutal, or angry,

But tame, pleasant, and gentle,

Following young ladies

Right into their homes, into their chambers,

But watch out if you haven't learned that tame wolves

Are the most dangerous of all.

BROthers Grimm
(Jacob 1785–1863; Wilhelm 1786–1859)

Little Red Cap

1812

Once upon a time there was a dear little girl. If you set eyes on her you could not but love her. The person who loved her most of all was her grandmother, and she could never give the child enough. Once she gave her a little cap of red velvet. Since it was so becoming and since she wanted to wear it all the time, everyone called her Little Red Cap.

One day her mother said to her: "Look, Little Red Cap. Here's a piece of cake and a bottle of wine. Take them to your grandmother. She is ill and feels weak, and they will give her strength. You'd better start now before it gets too hot, and when you're out in the woods, walk properly and don't stray from the path. Otherwise you'll fall and break the glass, and then there'll be nothing for grandmother. And when you enter her room, don't forget to say good morning, and don't go peeping in all the corners of the room."