3. Watching the dolphins, David Constantine
Narrative poem; like a prose

Identify:
1. sections
2. words
3. mood
4. speaker
5. audience
6. context
7. summary (literal)
8. techniques
9. images and concepts
10. theme statement

sections: 5 stanzas: dolphins; last stanza: disillusion but resignation; the dolphins however are still there
mood: hope to see the dolphins and joy first 5 stanzas - even if some words already prepare the reader to disillusion (hopeless; if, undecided); disillusion the last one
speaker: observer that gets involved (we)
Audience: readers
Context:
Summary: a group of passengers passing by the bridge to reach Piraeus port and wishing to see the dolphins on their journey.

Techniques:
Enjambment: continuity to the story
Simile: Like a saint: because the moment is so mysterious and mystic
like satyrs: divinity (play, dance)
Alliterations: movements in the sea (s)
point of view: we : human beings; they: dolphins
Contrast : at the end: from poetic words to concrete rough ones ; return to reality accepted; resignation
Theme: several connections to human ambitions and hopes in real life; human attraction for nature (freedom)
epiphany: sudden revelation of a hidden thought

1. On the first read, it may seem like a simple poem about a group of passengers passing by the bridge to reach Piraeus port and wishing to see the dolphins on their journey. However, this poem has several connections to human ambitions and hopes in real life and may also have some spiritual connections.

2. This dark, philosophical intensity and often uncanny beauty continues to flourish in Watching for Dolphins (1983), perhaps Constantine’s most widely admired volume and winner of the Poetry Society’s Alice Hunt Bartlett Award. The book’s title poem is a simply told yet remarkably subtle tale of passengers on a boat to Piraeus waiting to see dolphins, ‘all want[ing] epiphany / […] implor[ing] the sea […] / [for] smiling, snub-nosed, domed like satyrs’. But instead of the dolphins appearing, the passengers are left ‘among the great tankers, under their chains / In black water’, their ‘eyes cast down’ as if registering a certain numbness, returning to their ordinary lives. A contemporary master in conjuring these moments of subtle, collective emotion, this skill in fact
places Constantine’s work as close to his more obvious European influences as to the likes of Sean O’Brien and Peter Reading, despite their differing styles and approaches.

3. Watching For Dolphins is probably David Constantine's most celebrated poem. On the surface it seems to tell a simple, uneventful narrative about looking for dolphins while crossing by boat to Piraeus, the busy port which lies a short distance south of Athens, the Greek capital. (The harbour has a long history - stretching back into classical times.) But, as in most of Constantine's poems, this poem contains resonances, allusions and hidden depths - in this case, literal hidden depths. All the desires, hopes and dreams of the disparate passengers are focused on one thing: to see the dolphins. Isolated as they are individually, there's a common feeling that, if the dolphins had appeared, they would have bonded together in the shared unity of their experience: ... and had they then / On the waves, on the climax of our longing come / ... We should have laughed and lifted the children up / Stranger to stranger ...

Gradually throughout the poem this personal yet common longing becomes spiritual, religious in its intensity. The fat man stares like a saint; the gulls could be a sign; everyone wants epiphany. It's interesting that Constantine says that children would see dolphins if anyone would, for children are often more naturally receptive to and accepting of the wondrous and the divine, the numinous and the miraculous, than adults.

In the end the epiphany doesn't happen, and the poem ends anti-climatically. The people disembark with eyes cast down. They wake, blinking, as if emerging from a dream, a thwarted vision, another world. Though disappointed, they hide their disappointment, and leave the shared boat as isolated individuals once again.

I know this poem reverberates on many levels, but ultimately I think it's about the difficulty of locating the spiritual and the numinous in today's world, the world of the abused Aegean, which was once a mythical place of purity, a Garden of Eden before the Fall. (Athens is well known for its smog and pollution.) Now both it and the world are corrupted by tourism, materialism, shallow 'surface' experience, polluted with the great tankers, under their chains / In black water ...