

Worksheet - Could it be that questions tell you more than answers ever do?

Reading Exercise;

In this worksheet are some examples of 'question poems' that show some of the breadth and scope of what poets can do with questions, particularly with unanswered questions. Read them together and discuss the poems, what do the questions do? How do the images in these poems work?

Writing Exercise:

1. Who is the oldest person you know in your family? It does not have to be someone you knew yourself, maybe it was someone your parents told you about. Maybe it's a great grandmother, or your father's sister. Maybe, like Lemn Sissay you do not know your parents. Maybe you want to imagine a figure. Name that person (Grandmother/great aunt/uncle). Name their relationship to you.
(5 mins)

2. Before you start to write any poetry, write down some sentences about this person, about how you know them, did you meet them? And where did they live?

Describe where they lived, or where you imagine they lived, describe it with details. If it's not a place you know very well, imagine it like your local bus stop, your parents' kitchen or some other familiar place, your favourite place on a TV show. Somewhere you can describe. List the things you can see there, the sounds, the smells, what you can hear, what colours there are.
(10 mins)

3. Now look at your writing and think about what you don't know. Write a series of questions down. Questions about the place this person lived, questions you do not know the answer to. How did they live there. Why did they live there? What was it like there? When did they move there. The questions can be about details. Why did they have those curtains? When did they get a cat?
(10 mins)

4. Finally start your poem. Address your family member. (Hello Aunty/Hey Great Gran/Hi Uncle Oswald). And taking the two sections of prose that you have already written as your research and raw material try to layer your poem like a lasagne, one question and then one line of description. Juxtapose what you do and do not know, what is certain and what is uncertain.

You do not have to use it all, just your favourite bits, the strange things that sound good together, that pull against each other.
(10 mins)

5. Remember that poetry is all about editing. You have the first draft of something, now forget all my instructions and write it into the shape that works best for the poem it is becoming.

Pablo Neruda from the *Book of Questions*

VIII

What is it that upsets the volcanoes
that spit fire, cold and rage?

Why wasn't Christopher Columbus
able to discover Spain?

How many questions does a cat have?

Do tears not yet spilled
wait in small lakes?

Or are they invisible rivers
that run toward sadness?

*Que cosa irrita a los volcanes
que escupen fuego~ frio y furia?*

*Por que Cristobal Colon
no pudo descubrir a Espana?*

Cudntas preguntas tiene un gato?

*Las ldgrimas que no se lloran
esperan en pequeios lagos?*

*O serdn rios invisibles
que corren hacia la tristeza?*

Sawdust

Why not lindendust,
hackberry, hemlock,
live oak, maple, why
name the remains
after the blade, not
what it cut—

only now do I see
that the air is full
of small sharp stars
pinwheeling through
every living thing
that gets in their way.

—Sharon Bryan

Mother - by Lemn Sissay

Mother, what will I say to you?
Will I tell you about what I've been through?
Mother, will you criticise?
Mother, will you see it through my eyes?

Mother, what will you say to me?
It's through your eyes I'd like to see.
Mother will you criticise?
Mother, will you see it through my eyes?

Mother, what will you say to me?
Mother, will you read my poetry?
Am I just what you want me to be?
Mother, will you see it through my eyes?

Mother, what will you say to me?
Am I just what you want me to be,
Or, Mother, will you criticise?
Mother, will you see it through my eyes?

Family Vacation

Blue fish burst from this morning's tide
like applause, marking an end
to summer. When evening's color falls, it's
cottony pastels, the season's best hour
to swim or bodysurf; the tourists gone,
a few fatheaded seals converge to frolic.
My father ventures farthest, sturdy as he is
amidst the swirls, crests, and currents:
a hurricane's remnant. My mother's illness
troubles her gait within a waist-high surf
that's rough enough for the strongest swimmer,
much less a stem cell transplant patient
in her 60s. Tentative, amphibian-like, I'm
their adult daughter. Yesterday, I pleaded
with my mother to come ashore. "Don't make me
dead before I'm dead," she shouted.
"Live a little"—my father's refrain.
So I'll scan the waves, I, who live by trying
to decipher signs: ride or rip tide? Recovery
or remission? And they plunge just ahead
of the water's breaking, so that when it crashes,
it doesn't crush them, but rockets them forward
as if to say, today, today, today.

—Jody Zorgdrager