

Worksheet - "We are trapped in history and history is trapped in us" James Baldwin

Reading Exercise:

In this worksheet are some examples that show some of the breadth and scope of what poets can do with questions, particularly with unanswered questions. There is also a short excerpt from the front of Roald Dahls *Boy* that I recommend for anyone wishing to write family history. Read them together and discuss the poems, what do the poets do with that mixture of the personal and the public? How do the images in these poems work? How do they move from the specific to the particular.

Writing Exercise:

1. Think of a real historical moment that happened in your lifetime, take a few minutes. Just quickly write down what happened. A new president got elected somewhere, a dam above Todmorden nearly burst its banks, something in the news.

Now spend the next 10 minutes thinking about what you were doing that day, just write it down quickly but with any details you can remember. Small things, like the flavour of ice cream you chose at the shop or the colour of car you drove in. If you cannot remember these things, try to imagine them, where were you might you have been. Write down details.

2. Now choose a historical moment from before you were born. Maybe one you have studied in history. For example you could choose the fall of the Berlin Wall. Do you know where your family members were in 1989? What was happening in their lives. Try to think about how old your grandparents would have been 30 years ago. What town, what country were they in? Might they have been in. Again if you don't know for certain try to imagine it, one of the points of this exercise is to try and think into those spaces that are not recorded by history, the personal private spaces of families and lives.

Take 10 minutes to write down everything you can think of about where and what your grandparents might have been doing.

3. Now look at your memories and what you have written about your historical moment, think about what they might have in common, a colour? A taste? A feeling? Try to write a poem that connects these things, they all happened to your family. These very small events and big ones happened alongside each other. Think about how the poems we looked at move out from small too big. Use these as the start of your poem.
4. Remember that poetry writing is as much in what we leave out, what we edit out as what is left in. That most of the writing process is always rewriting.

## Examples of writing.

### Forward from Roald Dahls *Boy*

An autobiography is a book a person writes about his own life and it is usually full of all sorts of boring details.

This is not an autobiography. I would never write a history of myself.

On the other hand, throughout my young days at school and just afterwards a number of things happened to me that I have never forgotten. None of these things is important, but each of them made such a tremendous impression on me that I have never been able to get them out of my mind.

Each of them, even after a lapse of fifty and sometimes sixty years, has remained seared on my memory. I didn't have to search for any of them. All I had to do was skim them off the top of my consciousness and write them down.

Some are funny. Some are painful. Some are unpleasant. I suppose that is why I have always remembered them so vividly. All are true.

The Gift  
BY LI-YOUNG LEE

To pull the metal splinter from my palm  
my father recited a story in a low voice.  
I watched his lovely face and not the blade.  
Before the story ended, he'd removed  
the iron sliver I thought I'd die from.

I can't remember the tale,  
but hear his voice still, a well  
of dark water, a prayer.  
And I recall his hands,  
two measures of tenderness  
he laid against my face,  
the flames of discipline  
he raised above my head.  
Had you entered that afternoon  
you would have thought you saw a man  
planting something in a boy's palm,  
a silver tear, a tiny flame.  
Had you followed that boy  
you would have arrived here,  
where I bend over my wife's right hand.

Look how I shave her thumbnail down  
so carefully she feels no pain.  
Watch as I lift the splinter out.  
I was seven when my father  
took my hand like this,  
and I did not hold that shard  
between my fingers and think,  
Metal that will bury me,  
christen it Little Assassin,  
Ore Going Deep for My Heart.  
And I did not lift up my wound and cry,  
Death visited here!  
I did what a child does  
when he's given something to keep.  
I kissed my father.

Montevideo  
BY Jules Supervielle

I was being born and a brand new carriage  
passed by our window.

The coachman woke up the dawn  
with a little whipcrack.

An archipelago of night  
Still floated on the liquid day.

Walls were awakening, along with the sand  
that slept, pressed inside them.

Against the sky, a piece of my soul  
glided out on a blue rail,

and another piece attached itself  
to a flying scrap of paper

which stumbled against a stone,  
all its eagerness trapped.

The morning was counting its birds –  
never losing count.

Eucalyptus sent  
entrusted itself to the expansive air.

In Uruguay on the Atlantic  
the air was so sociable, so easy –  
the colours at the horizon  
pressed closer to view the houses.

It was me being born in the muffled heart of woods  
where the green shoots push through slowly,  
born beneath the sea where the seaweed curls upwards  
convincing the wind it can blow down there.

The Earth was forever moving and its rounds  
intensifying its own with its atmosphere,  
sensing on a wave or in its softest, deepest waters  
swimmers' heads, the feet of divers.