

Memory Poem: Poetry as a Time Capsule

By: Claire Hong

Education level: Junior High or High School

Genre: Poetry, Hybrid

Time frame: 50 minutes or self-paced. This lesson could extend into multiple sessions with revision exercises and sharing drafts with the class.

Objective: The goal of this lesson is to allow space for students to reflect on significant moments in their lives or memories that preoccupy their minds. Students have the opportunity to consider audience or if they would prefer to write a poem for themselves.

Prior knowledge and skills: None.

Required materials: Paper, pen or pencil, handout of the poem example (or digital access)

Literary model: Safia Elhillo's "The Cairo Apartments"

Sequence of activities:

Example Reading (10 minutes): "The Cairo Apartments" by Safia Elhillo from *Girls That Never Die*. Students can read the poem to themselves and then hear it out loud, depending on ability. Provide an opportunity for students to share about their experience reading and/or hearing the poem.

Potential questions: What sensory details stand out? How does this change your idea about a poem's form or what it needs to look or sound like? How does the poem make you feel, or what does it make you think about? What words or references were new to you? Do you speak more than one language, and would you include multiple languages in your writing? Why do you think writers choose to write about the past?

Writing Prompt (30 minutes or self-paced): Write about a specific moment in time that you don't want to forget or can't stop thinking about. Try to include all the details, so you can always look back at this poem and remember.

This memory could be of a place, friends, family, event, a memorable dream, or a change in your life. This could be a memory that is difficult to fully represent, or your feelings about that time might be complex.

Think about who this poem is for. Are you writing this for yourself, those who were part of the memory, or a larger audience? What do you want to hide from your readers and what do you want your readers to know? How can you do this through language?

Optional Sharing (10 minutes): Ask if students would like to share their poem or about the experience of writing their poem as a class or in small groups.

The Cairo Apartments
by Safia Elhillo

The cousins as barefoot children floating out of polished rooms. Together we clattered between floors in each other's jalabiyas, spectacular games of hide & seek, three floors & a roof to search. I can't remember if we made the songs up ourselves, *where is the bride's house?* *Ali Alloy* *prayed his prayers boarded the boat worked his labors*. The specter of our adults in the mornings & nights, their strained & hushed voices. Our grandmothers were beautiful & suited to exile. Enormous coils of blackened hair. Silk scarves only for driving. The eyeliner tattooed, eternal livid stain on the rim of each eyelid, bare faces forgotten in childhood. Our mothers were less glamorous & always tired, always at work, wore blue jeans, cool hands that carried us to our beds at night. I loved exile & the close quarters it afforded us. I loved it enough to stay gone when all the others went home, moved on, unlatched their shuttered houses, beat the carpets & kissed their neighbors & cried. The apartments were emptied. I return to Cairo years later & look for our child-ghosts kicking a ball in the corridors between unfinished buildings. The time Almustafa tripped & opened the skin of his palm on a fallen brick, how I wouldn't look up from my book to see what he was trying to show me, how he wrapped the bloodied hand in a dish towel & pressed down until our mother came home. I cannot find us. I more closely resemble now the young parents who corralled us, creased & shot through with sadness. There will be no children of my own to carry to their waiting beds. & the city that belonged to me has gone, was never mine, I dreamt it, I wrote it down, invented it, made all of it up, everything but the smell of corn roasting sweetly on the street below. The carved wooden shutters. Motes of dust arcing through the light. A workbook splayed before me, strained cursive in the feminine conjugation. Why I didn't look up. He didn't say he was bleeding. A shopkeeper remarks that I look very clean for a Sudanese. Ya samar ya samara. Ya asmar ya asmarani. Upper Nile. Silt color. Who taught you to speak Arabic like that? I don't know where the cousins have gone. I don't know what countries we've settled for. I imagine everyone back home, that they might have been playing for hours without me. My brother still with the faint stripe of a scar down his palm, remembers the stitches were done without anesthesia. The doctor telling jokes to distract him.