

If You Find Yourself: A Poetry Lesson Plan

Earlier this year, I had the pleasure to hear a talk by Aimee Nezhukumatathil in which she discussed, among other things, the vitality of sense-based writing. For young writers especially, learning to use the five senses in their work allows students to connect with one another as human creatures, animals, across difference, and so it was exciting to design a class around one of Aimee's poems. Please find the lesson below, as well as some student responses to the prompt from 8th graders at Orange Grove Middle School in Tucson, AZ.

1. Introduce students to Aimee Nezhukumatathil and read through the example poem below two times, incorporating student volunteers, while displaying images of houseboats in India (available via a Google Images search) to give them a sense of what is being described.

If you Find Yourself on a Houseboat

Kumarokam, India

Pick each word carefully
from a nearby branch.
You won't want to be weighed
down with jibber-jabber
or stone fruit. You'll need
a necklace of green parakeets
and neem butter. Notice I never
said compass. Notice there isn't
a single piece of metal to hold
this craft together. Only coir
and thatch—even the mini-porch
and settee are made entirely of
bamboo. And if you ever
wonder how your boat
has indoor plumbing, a stove,
and icebox—hold the urge
to ask your driver. He will be
too busy steering with a stick
plunged into the backwaters.
One tap of water cane and you
can cross a boulevard of toads.
There is no mystery on water
greater than the absence of rust.
The very lack of it only moves
each reed and shorebird to bend.
The question is a blanket
for your shoulders when you

finally reach the shore.
The question is a rope
so it doesn't float away.

2. Define any unfamiliar words (neem, coir) and ask students how they perceive the poet's instructions. Which are things they might actually do ("hold the urge to ask your driver") and which involve the imagination ("a necklace of green parakeets")?

3. Examine the five senses in the poem. What do they see, smell, hear, touch, and taste?

4. For more advanced students, discuss the final metaphor and encourage them to incorporate metaphors into their poem.

5. Have students do a brainstorm on scratch-paper where they finish this phrase with as many possibilities as they can come up with: "If you find yourself..." Encourage students to explore a range of ideas including both physical places and emotional states.

6. They can either select one of their responses to center the poem around or they can offer many types of instruction in a single poem.

7. Share the prompt for their poem and get them writing:

-Give instructions to a "you" that incorporate the five senses. These can be concrete or whimsical or both.

-Use the phrases "you'll need" or "you'll want."

8. As students write, encourage them to follow strange tangents and let their poems lead them to new places. If it seems appropriate, begin with a free write before introducing the poem, involving odd words or use bibliomancy while projecting the houseboat image, and have students work these results into their final poems.

9. Encourage students to share their poems, either with the class, in small groups, or anonymously by reading their responses aloud for them. Cheers! May you find your students writing storms.

Example student poems:

If you find yourself clueless

Find a clue
Try to understand and look.
Ask questions just ask.
Don't be shy talk to people.
Follow signs.
Figure out where.
Don't be embarrassed.
Get help.
Find home.
Always know
what you're
getting into.
Don't be sacred.
Notice your surroundings.
Smell where you are.
One question you'll ask is

Why?

-Nicholas Brown

Untitled

If you find yourself on a boulder
on the shoulder of a mountain,
pick your words carefully.
And take your time,
you will be in your place for a long time.

You'll need to be patient,
as you will not move for millennia
and you will want to be free of your heavy body.
Your body will have no limbs,
just one figure, still and stone-faced,
as if frozen in place.

Notice, you never really think,
but rather feel thoughts.

You feel the fur of a Doberman,
darting past.

You know the wind is building,
when a pebble falls off your
shoulder.

You taste the rain as it falls
onto your tongue and smell
the woods as the rain falls on it
like a waterfall after a storm.

You want to know more,
to feel and see more.

But you lack the ability to do so.

The world will remain a mystery to you
for you are imprisoned as a boulder on
the shoulder of a mountain.

--Josh Bohney