

## **Things I Didn't Know I Loved**

**Objective:** The use of unique and unexpected details. Recognition of poetry as a force so powerful that poets can be imprisoned for it. An introduction the importance of free expression.

**Education level:** 3-12

**Time frame:** one hour, easily extended over two sessions (students would read, respond and revise for the second session)

**Prior knowledge:** none

**Required materials:** none

**Literary model:** Nazim Hikmet's poem, "Things I Didn't Know I Loved" and/or Norman Dubie's poem, "A List"

### **Sequence of Activities:**

#### **Discussion and game of Telephone (25 minutes)**

I begin this class by asking what people can be imprisoned for. After the students throw out a couple of ideas, I ask, Do you think someone could go to jail for writing poetry? Under what circumstances might that happen? Why might a government be threatened by a poet?

Even in lower grades this opens up a lively discussion about freedom of expression, disobedience, and which is more powerful, the pen or the sword. I bring up samizdat (the copying and distribution of literature banned by the state), and we talk about poems and books that were kept in circulation by being memorized. What book is important enough to you that you would try to memorize it in order to pass it to others? I ask.

Then we play Telephone, beginning with one line of a poem that they whisper to each other, one at a time, until the last person to receive it recites the altered line to the class, usually to tremendous hilarity.

If you didn't want to risk your words being altered, how else could you smuggle them into the world? I ask. After they share their ideas, I tell them about Nazim Hikmet, who used his fingernail to carve his poems into cakes of soap. What do you think his poems were about? I ask. What do you think he missed during all the years he spent imprisoned?

After their guesses, we read several lines from Hikmet's poem, "Things I Didn't Know I Loved".

I never knew I liked  
night descending like a tired bird  
on the smoky wet plain

I didn't know I like the sky  
cloudy or clear

I never knew I loved roads  
even the asphalt kind

Are these things anybody would miss, or just Nazim Hikmet? I ask. If you could never leave this classroom, what are things about your life you would miss that nobody else would be able to guess? As students call out what they would miss, we talk about their use of detail, and how details make things more personal and specific.

Note: I always encourage the classroom teacher to participate, including them in the discussion and asking about what they'd miss—the students love this.

### **Writing Their Own List of Things They Hadn't Known They Would Miss (25 minutes)**

Everybody writes their own list of unique things they **hadn't known** they would miss. Should pizza and computer games be on this list? I ask. No! they shout.

As they write I walk around the room encouraging specific details: colors, smells, textures, moods. I read vivid lines from lists in progress. If someone is having trouble getting started, I'll ask them a few questions: Would you miss your dog's breath? Long-division homework? Your little sister's voice?

### **Time to Share With the Group (ten minutes)**

I encourage the class to tell readers which lines and details were the most surprising and interesting to them. I ask them to try and quote the lists from memory: the beginning of samizdat.

### **Samples of Student Work:**

A List of Things I Didn't Know I Liked  
Class Collaboration

The silence of the sun coming up  
The coolness of a grocery store in summer  
To stare into the sunset and imagine and feel a part of it  
The moon like a piece of gold  
My red dog running through the tall grass  
The silence of a room when you're sitting by yourself  
Hearing myself sing along with a famous singer  
The sun peeking through a cloud after a storm  
The sound of horses' hooves  
A road going downhill looking like a stream of water