

Who Is It That YOU Love?
by Lisa O’Neill

Grade: 8th-12th

Materials: All you need for this exercise are several pieces of paper and something to write with. And, of course, your imagination.

Summary: Because we are in the midst of an election season, I thought we could spend a few weeks looking at poems that consider what it means to be a citizen, to participate in the voting process, and to voice one’s opinion. Sometimes writers celebrate their countries and other times they critique them—often both of these impulses come from the writer’s sense of patriotism, a desire for their countries to be a good place for everyone to live. We will look at poems about homelands, about compassion and freedom, about what it means to belong or not belong, and about writers’ different experiences of living in the United States of America.

Step 1: Watch video of Aracelis Girmay reading “[You Are Who I Love](#).” After watching Aracelis Girmay, [print it out and read it again for yourself](#), underlining words or phrases that stand out and writing notes. Then answer the following questions:

How does this poem make you feel? Why?

Who is the “you” she is addressing in the poem? Is it one person or many? Explain.

This poem is written in the form of a list, listing all the “yous” she loves. What is the impact of that repetition and including them all together?

What’s your favorite line? Why?

What words or phrases are repeated? Why?

What are some ordinary actions she describes the “yous” taking? What are some less ordinary or more special ones?

She mentions that she wrote this poem by an organization called Split this Rock in relation to the 2017 inauguration. Any thoughts on why this poem feels related to that time in history?

Are there any connections you feel between the different “yous” the poet loves?

Why do you think she was inspired to write this poem? What do you think she hopes the reader gets from it?

Other observations?

Step 3: Let’s write! We’re going to write a poem about who *YOU* love. You can think about people you know well, but, as Girmay does, you can also think about what makes you like or appreciate strangers. For example, some of my “you who I love lines would be”:

You are who I love, standing above your toddler, holding her hands as she walks, unsteady, on her new feet along the sidewalk.

You are who I love, wearing your mask to protect others at the grocery store, with your smile hidden still trying to communicate kindness through your eyes.

You are who I love, waiting in line for a half hour, one hour, two, three outside your polling place to cast your ballot.

You are who I love, baking bread for your neighbor, leaving the offering on their doorstep.

See how I gave really specific details for all of these. Using senses like sight, smell, taste, touch, and sound helps the reader be inside the experience with you.

Brainstorm: Write the answers to these questions.

Who are people you love in your life (try to think of one or two to start and then you can add)? What specific things (be as specific as possible) makes you love them?

What actions or qualities make you appreciate strangers?

Try to think of some things that have happened in the last week or so that have made you appreciate someone else. These could be small things. Most of the things we do in life are small but these gestures add up.

Who are some people that you don't know well in your neighborhood or in your community that you appreciate or have affection for? What do they do?

What are some things that people you love do? (Think here of specific actions that involve the senses: sight, smell, touch, sound, taste; Example: who are you I love, standing over the pot of gumbo, stirring so the roux doesn't burn; you are who I love, setting the table for an extra person because you never want to see someone go hungry; you are who I love, putting Whitney Houston "I Wanna Dance with Somebody" on repeat and spinning me off the couch and onto the linoleum kitchen floor; you are who I love, standing up for your friend with your words when someone said something cruel about them)

Turning brainstorm into a poem. Take the ideas you have generated above and put them into poetic form. A reminder, your poem can rhyme but it doesn't have to.

Begin with "You are who I love" and venture into your own version

Some things to consider:

- Use repetition of words or phrases as Girmay
- Go back and forth between concrete details (planting marigolds) and more abstract description (You wanting to listen, you trying to be so still)
- Think about these "yous" in relationship to one another. You might think or consider whether you see things they share in common and build on that.