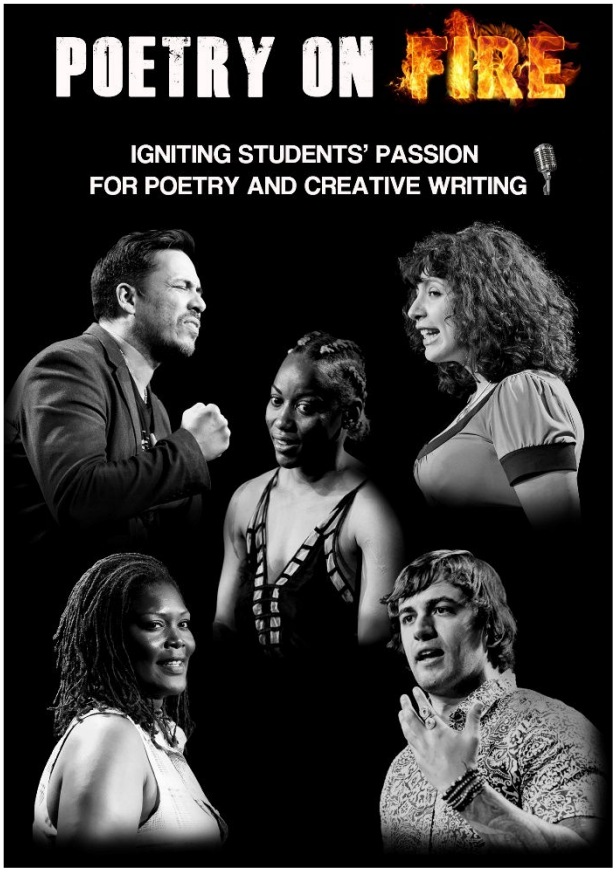
POETRY ON FIRE
BY SAM PIERSTORFF



LESSON PLAN

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SPOKEN WORD vs. SLAM POETRY

Although I will often refer to these synonymously, let's be clear about some definitions. The term "slam" poetry does not refer to insult poetry. Think of the "slam" in slam poetry like a baseball player hitting a Grand Slam! Now imagine a poem being that good.

"Slam" is the medium in which a lot of spoken word is performed. A poetry slam is a competitive poetry performance, which began in the mid-1980s in Chicago by a man named Marc Smith who wanted more audience engagement because he felt poetry readings were essentially boring. At a poetry slam, the audience judges the poets, and the winner is often gifted a prize. A poetry slam also has certain rules (i.e. 3-minute time limits, no props or musical instruments, etc.) whereas spoken word is, according to the Poetry Foundation, "a broad designation for poetry intended for performance."

Although spoken word is not limited to the stage, it is meant to be heard. The subject matter contained within a spoken word poem often comes from a more passionate place than a traditional page poem that may, for example, be about red robins and waterfalls, and the spoken word poet and his or her poem is often written and performed in order to affect change and/or to influence an audience's perception of things, not just paint a beautiful picture.

WHY SPOKEN WORD?

With the rise of YouTube channels such as Button Poetry and Write Now, each having numerous viral poems with views in the millions and comments like "This poem changed my life," it's a good time for teachers to start paying attention to the literature that moves students, speaks their language, and tackles issues that they are yearning to explore. So why not use it in our classes?

The good news is that whatever you decide to call your students' poems, this series will ignite their passion for creative writing and will also ignite your passion for teaching it.

BACKGROUND & HISTORY

A few years ago, I was in an English department meeting lobbying for a few hundred dollars to be used for a poetry slam event that I wanted to host on campus. I was already successfully hosting an off-campus, annual, sell-out slam with 600 attendees, some of whom were students but most of whom were not. I wanted to bring this entertaining, influential, and deeply moving art form to campus, but I needed money to pay a few renowned poets to come perform. That's when one of my robust male colleagues (a PhD and a 20-year veteran professor) stood, his face reddening with frustration, and said, "What ever happened to 'Poetry' with a capitol 'P'? Why do we need to support all this slam poetry? What about Shakespeare? Doesn't anyone read Shakespeare anymore?"

Some of my colleagues nodded in agreement. Others looked surprised. But this is a common argument. Why spoken word poetry? Why slam poetry instead of Shakespeare?

WHY SLAM POETRY?

Here's the simple argument: Shakespeare is great. But Shakespeare is boring to a generation of students who are looking at their own lives and the crumbling world around them. They need an outlet to speak for themselves or at least they need voices to hear who are like them—poets of color, young poets, poets who struggle with depression, identity, fatherlessness, broken hearts, etc. And sure, Shakespeare covers a lot of those same themes, but he is not writing in a living language that students can readily understand in a way that resonates to their core and makes them want to share passage after passage on their social media sites or in the pages of their journals.

I take a different approach, and it has worked wonders. I start my students with spoken word. Get them hooked on the poetic drug that we call "slam poetry" . . . and then slowly over time, I back them into Shakespeare and other canonized poets (i.e. Wordsworth, Byron, Keats, Blake, Dickinson, Whitman, etc.).

Students, however, need to first understand the power of poetry, the way it can crack issues wide open and start discussions or help a writer address personal problems that can be reflected in a universal way, so they not only help themselves, their poetry may actually help others as well.

THE POWER OF POETRY

That's the power of poetry: to give voice to the voiceless, to give power to the pen, and to allow students to write freely. But this takes bravery both from the student writers and from the teachers themselves. I have learned over two decades of teaching writing and poetry, that when asked about themselves, students absolutely want to write. They want to share their pain and their triumphs. They want to explore emotions, imagery, and word play. They want to write, but they have not been given the tools, the platform, or the permission to write freely. In other words, the fire has not yet been lit, but my hope is that this video series will help ignite your students' passion for writing as well as your passion for teaching poetry.

When you give your students the tools and the permission to be poets, the results will blow your mind. And once that happens, they might actually ask you about reading Shakespeare next.

SLAM POETRY IN EDUCATION

Poetry on Fire is designed for 7th-12th grade students. These programs will provide motivation, curriculum, and performance and writing tips to help facilitate interactive writing lessons in classrooms that will lead to powerful poems that students can write and perform.

For many students, slam poetry can be cathartic, a place to channel one's anger and frustration or fears. It may also simply be a place to explore humor and life's ridiculousness. Either way, it is not an exaggeration to say that slam poetry has saved many young lives by allowing students

the freedom to express themselves without the restraints of rigid poetic forms or classic diction. Students instead come to see themselves as poets with something to say.

STUDENTS BENEFIT FROM SLAM POETRY BECAUSE IT

- Stimulates their imagination
- Improves listening
- Gives students a voice, an outlet, and a license to be a poet themselves
- Instills a love of language, sound, and imagery
- Teaches lessons without moralizing
- Provides insights and empathy into other cultures and socio-economic classes
- Improves language skills such as vocabulary, comprehension, and sequencing
- Encourages performance and oral communication skills

But don't take my word for it. Let's look at some of the poetic examples from the film.

ADVICE TO STUDENTS ON WRITING AND PERFORMING

In this important section, each poet reveals some key components of writing and performing.

Encourage your students to make a list of at least 3-5 pieces of advice (or do this together as a class).

Discuss the importance of this advice and then, more importantly, ask them to apply these ideas in their own work.

Additional Resources

Books

- *The Poet's Companion: A Guide to the Pleasures of Writing Poetry* – by Kim Addonizio & Dorianne Laux
- *A Poetry Handbook* – by Mary Oliver
- *Poetry 180: A Turning Back to Poetry* – Edited by Billy Collins
- *Stand Up Poetry: An Expanded Anthology* – Edited by Charles Harper Webb
- *The Poetry Home Repair Manual: Practical Advice for Beginning Poets* – by Ted Kooser

Online Resources

- *Poetry Foundation:* https://www.poetryfoundation.org/
- *Poetry in America (PBS)*: https://www.pbs.org/show/poetry-in-america/
- *Poets & Writers*: https://www.pw.org/
- *Button Poetry*: https://www.youtube.com/c/ButtonPoetry
- *Write About Now*: https://www.youtube.com/c/WANpoetry/videos

ROADKILL by Danee "Queen D" Black

You can call me overly sympathetic
But I feel bad when I see roadkill—
Mangled squirrels with squashed hopes of making across
Dogs and cats that once belonged to loving homes
Are now owned by concrete
Street sweepers and highway crews manage the messes made
By preoccupied drivers and anxious animals
But in some neighborhoods
The roadkill stays and festers
Until it become dust or compost leaving remnants of fur and color
Signifying the insignificance of their existence
But somehow, I don't feel as moved when I see walking tombstones on t-shirts
Middle school boys wear dead bodies to school
And we pretend that we don't seem them
It's easier to navigate around a dead squirrel in the middle of the road
Than it is to navigate the body of a 16-year-old boy lying on my classroom floor
We can all see him
Mangled and twisted with his hopes of seeing 18 crushed into tiny fragments
I wish there was a street sweeper or
At least a grief counselor
To help us clean up this mess made by displaced anger and a stray bullet
But the bodies pile up here
Decomposing as we try to hold our composure
There are no backpacks here
Students wear body bags
Strapped to backs that are trying to keep their worlds tall
But the stench of death is changing their posture
Hunched back kids with their heads held in despair
Thoughts of the own mortality fleeting like falling stars
They are too afraid to dreams
So they wrap themselves up in RIPs and obituaries
Staring death in the face because they are not afraid to die
They know so many people who have been there
But don't know anyone who has been to college or had father
So they have the grim reaper drop them off at school everyday
And I am supposed to pretend that I don't notice
I spend my days Maury-style convincing them that He is not their father
I try to change the subject but in art they paint dead bodies
Jonathan brought his best friend to school… in a knapsack
He unfolded him on his desk like broken origami
His head, plastered to an obituary with barely enough pages to span his 16 years of life
His arms, in a photo where he embraced his little brother the way a palm tree does the wind
His legs lain caddy corner on some curb in Oakland

A snapshot in a newspaper article that reads: Another Boy Slain
Teachers are not supposed to cry so I grow a blind eye to the death toll
Become desensitized to the boys killed on roads that I drive on everyday
Maybe this is why I cry when I see roadkill

LESSON PLAN: "Roadkill" by Danee "Queen D" Black

CONTEXT: Note the symbolism and metaphor in this poem. Queen D begins with a haunting description of road kill, which hooks and shocks the reader. Then she takes a turn and we realize that her setup was not about animals at all. Her poem becomes more shocking when we realize that she is comparing mangled, dead animals to the lives of young men who also die in the streets where nobody seems to notice or care. As a teacher, Queen D can't understand this harsh desensitization toward the loss of human life.

DISCUSSION: Consider asking your students about this desensitization. Are people desensitized to violence and murder? Why? What are some contemporary examples? Why are people so easily able to dismiss the loss of human life? This is an important discussion to have in the classroom to generate some empathy and understanding.

WRITING ACTIVITY: Ask your students to think about something symbolic that they might describe in the opening of their poem, which they will later compare to something else that's more important. It might help to start with big ideas like life and death, hope and loss. These big abstract concepts are better explained through clear, concrete elements. The loss of young life is explained through the metaphor of roadkill here. What symbol can be used to describe love or joy, hate or violence? In more mathematical terms, we might say, How is X like Y? How is a dirty room like stress? How is a burned-down home like depression? How is a decomposing pumpkin left on the porch after Halloween like the lives of the people inside? Ask your students to connect a concrete image to an abstract subject and then begin to write. Start with details of the image. Describe it and then make the turn, as Queen D did, to connect the concrete image to the big abstract concept.

Alternatively, you might write an image on the board: dirty room, burned-down home, decomposing pumpkin . . . and ask students to begin describing these images, and then as they explore the images on paper, they may begin to come up with their own connections to deeper subject matter. Remember: writing is generative. We don't always know where we are going when we begin a poem. That process often happens while writing not before. So let them write and see where their details take them.

A LETTER TO MY ANCESTORS by Brandon Melendez

My grandmother describes my Spanish as desmadre.
She means my accent is a wretched thing, her language a mess or ruined.
Directly translated, desmadre means “without mother.”
So what she is saying is she hears none of her history
in the sounds my mouth is versed in making.
What she is saying is the last relic on my tongue of her homeland
is something I ruin every time I speak.
She says this is a curse I inherited from my father.
Over the years, we've heard my father's Spanish leave him,
and every word he forgets, every feeling he can't explain
is a family we will never hear from again.
Sometimes my grandmother catches my father
responding to her in bad Spanglish,
like it's trying to bury Spanish between English tombstones,
like this language doesn't belong to his mother, and it's all desmadre now.
But my father knows the less of his mother found in his speech,
the more American our family becomes.
And he doesn't find it ironic that we live on land stolen from his ancestors,
but he refuses to speak of Mexico as a homeland.
He refuses to speak of a Homeland at all.
He has done everything short of skinning himself
to distance the family from Mexico
because for my father to be successful
and to be American mean the same thing.
When my father married my mother, a white woman,
this was the most American thing he could have done
Because now, now his children can never be mistaken
for foreign or illegal.
They can never be mistaken for their father.
I can't tell you how many times people see me with my father or grandmother
and swear I must have been adopted,
then laugh awkwardly when my grandmother glares at them
like, "What'd you just say?"
But my father laughs too, fully aware this means he made it.
He has three sons with light skin
and names that don't get butchered in American mouths.
I know for him this celebration is both selfish and sacrifice.
He is giving up his culture so his children can have the privilege
to be treated like we belong here.
And still he praises us.
Our grandfather's face from all the photographs.
On the rare occasion we are with family,
he shames me for the way I answer all their questions in English,

and then shames me when I try to answer in Spanish
and every word sounds like desmadre.
I see my father caught in a strange paradox
of wanting to both preserve and hide where he comes from,
and teach his children that silence is the easiest answer.
But at my grandfather's funeral the whole family is in one room,
and for a day we are all fluent or family enough to belong here.
My grandmother holds my father like she's resurrecting a dead language—
like there are some things that can't be stolen from our ancestors,
like memories of home, the sound of her mother's voice,
or the legacy of how we got here, or how we have always been here.

LESSON PLAN: "A Letter to My Ancestors" by Brandon Melendez

CONTEXT: Note the dialogue and context of this poem. Melendez grew up biracial with a Mexican father and a white mother, and his paternal grandmother describes Melendez's Spanish as "desmadre," which is "Mexican slang for something that is screwed up," riotous, or chaotic. The same way that the grandmother describes his Spanish is arguably the same way he feels as a person. "Desmadre" describes his speech but is also symbolic of his life, which feels a bit chaotic as he navigates two cultures.

DISCUSSION: Consider asking your students about their own cultural or religious conflicts with their parents. How does their family background conflict with dominant American culture? And for those who are not from a different religion or culture, ask students how their ideologies and outlooks on life, even their goals and future aspirations, conflict with their parents. In other words, try to get students to talk (or write) about the conflicts that reside in themselves as a result of the ways in which they differ from their parents or their larger family heritage. We see this most often in cultural, religious, and political ways.

WRITING ACTIVITY: Ask your students to think about an insult they have received from family and begin the poem there. "My mother always called me . . . ." My father always said I was . . . ." Students can substitute with any family member, of course, but the idea is to hook readers with the insult. This will create immediate interest as readers ask why they were called this and how it was resolved (if it ever was). From this point, allow students to write freely about why they are referred to in this way, what it feels like, and how they might go about making changes in the future. This could be a sympathetic and understanding piece, or this could end up being a very angry and irate poem about family disagreements. Let it be whatever the poet wants it to be. This will be a cathartic piece of creative writing for the author. Allow space for that and you will be surprised by what students are carrying inside.

TO: BALTIMORE by Joyce Lee

Dear Baltimore,
Mary Land hates you, she says
you too cold to be claimed
you too calm about your cold to ever be seen as
anything but dead and dying more –
you too hood B
she can't water down your type of Black
can't concrete your jungle to match her Channel knockoff
you turn water to government housing
and concrete to sleeping bags
you turn street corners to walk-in pharmacies
and ghettos into survival stories in wait
Mary Land say she too good for you
say she came too far from Nothin' rep it
say you make legit a side hustle
she tryin' to forget that part of herself
she paid for a new nose and got it all up in the air now and
you can't afford the seat she sat in for your own reconstruction, B
you Africa black and Oakland hopeless
you doin' too much and too little at the same time that's why
Mary Land doin' Atlanta
'cause your touch is so callous
'cause these new-aged blacks no longer want to remember
how much work black still puttin' in
Georgia buys that good hair, DC manicured
Brooklyn is platinum G'd in Gentrification
B, you all Timb's and rubble
rebel and reckless for no reason
only the raw can respect it
so I understand
how a suit n' tie can choke a strong neck till it's
all blue-collar n' swollen knuckles and boots without straps to pull yourself up by –
I get it like given up on getting it their way
I get it like takin' what's due
and payin' dues just in being yourself, Baltimore
they read the Black in your name and nod no
at the sight of it on every application, Baltimore
I get the struggle.
So, if you ever feel some type of way about Mary Land leavin' you
because she prefers the argyle sweaters of DC
and the penny loafers of Georgia to the grit
in your beautiful gold teeth
holla at me.

LESSON PLAN: “To: Baltimore” by Joyce Lee

CONTEXT: Note the strong use of personification in Joyce Lee’s poem, “To: Baltimore.” Baltimore becomes a person, a black man, and Mary Land (spelled here like a first and last name) is a “She” who doesn’t see the value of Baltimore. This is a poem that clearly celebrates a city but the powerful themes of class and race and the conflicts therein are also very evident.

DISCUSSION: Ask students to dissect this poem by exploring the details associated with Baltimore vs. those associated with Mary Land. How do they differ? How is this poem a microcosm for race and class in the nation at large?

In addition, many students live in cities that aren’t well-loved or perhaps they, the students themselves, wear clothes and express themselves in ways that attract negative attention and judgment. Ask students about that. What do people see on the outside of a city or a person that is not always true on the inside?

WRITING ACTIVITY: In a similar way, ask students to write about their own city by personifying it and writing a letter to it. Allow students to pay tribute to their hometown if they choose to by detailing the many layers in their city that may appear bad on the surface but upon closer inspection may actually be really great. Or students may choose to write a hate letter because they truly believe they live in a terrible place and can’t wait to escape. Either way is okay. Allow them the freedom to infuse their poem with love or hate, depending on how they feel—but encourage them to paint a picture and animate their poem with personification throughout. Their city should feel alive—like a living, breathing, person. Whether they ultimately love or hate that place is up to the writer.

A LETTER TO SLAM POETRY by Jaz Sufi

When asked, "Why poetry?"
Many poets respond, "Because poetry saved my life."
Many poets are liars.
We learn fast how anything can sound like the truth
if you say it on a stage, or write it on a page, or really do believe it.
Like how a faith healer believes his power only comes from his hands.
Poetry can translate.
Poetry can describe.
Poetry can affirm, despair, celebrate, immortalize,
but poetry cannot do, cannot work, cannot fix what is broken—
cannot save lives.
Poetry is poetry.
The writer trapped in amber
at the moment of that poem's writing.
I have a friend who wrote a poem
addressing his friend's drug addiction.
He thinks this means
he doesn't have to address his friend's drug addiction.
The sheer act of writing a poem changes nothing,
is only another hit from another kind of drug,
and there is no addiction as powerful as this.
This beloved sadness.
This way to hate ourselves beautifully or lie ourselves happy
and have it applauded like gospel either way.
Poetry is just papier-mâché.
We poets. We are flesh, blood, bone.
Ink does not run through our veins.
We cannot write ourselves beautiful
and have it last any longer than three minutes.
I don't practice in front of mirrors.
It never looks convincing.
I don't see a poet or a poem,
just a girl too scared to go back to therapy
and find an audience that talks back—
an editor that will scroll a red pen
not just on a poem, but my entire life.
Poetry does not have hands to hold shovels
to fill the holes inside of us or to pull us out when
we have fallen down them.
It is only our own two hands that can save us,
not the pens we stitch to them.
We clutch them so tightly we forget
we have always been strong enough to let go.

If your life has been saved
it's because you saved it.
Do not praise poetry for this.
Do not worship the word,
worship the god who wrote it.
It is hard to be more than a poem.
It takes work to weigh more than paper.
Writing a lighthouse is easy.
Sailing away from it is the hard part.
Poetry is not the ship.
Poetry is not the captain.
Life is a constant storm,
and poetry is just what we make of the wreckage,
something to cling to alone in the ocean.
Let go.
You will not drown.
You've always known how to swim.

LESSON PLAN: "A Letter to Slam Poetry" by Jaz Sufi

CONTEXT: Note the strong use of inquiry here in Jaz Sufi's poem, "A Letter to Slam Poetry." The author is inquiring about "poetry," asking why it's needed and what it's for while simultaneously giving readers answers that they, perhaps, aren't ready to hear. The author's premise seems to be that we often believe that certain things saved us when in truth, we actually saved ourselves but are too afraid to say it out loud as if we don't deserve self-praise.

DISCUSSION: In the last few lines of her poem, Sufi uses an extended metaphor relating poetry to sailing: "Writing a lighthouse is easy. / Sailing away from it is the hard part. / Poetry is not the ship. / Poetry is not the captain. / Life is a constant storm, / and poetry is just what we make of the wreckage, / something to cling to alone in the ocean. / Let go. / You will not drown. / You've always known how to swim." Discuss her use of metaphor, its purpose and meaning, and the empowering conclusion to this piece.

WRITING ACTIVITY: Ask students about something that "saved" them, something that they feel was important to their recovery after a dark time (i.e. break up, addiction, depression, etc.) What was the "thing" that brought them joy or helped them through a tough time? This could range from a dog they love to a dear friend, a song or exercise, a craft like writing poetry or painting, or hobbies like exercise or collecting cards—anything one does to bring about calm and contentment is fine. Once students have thought about, and perhaps discussed the importance of this "thing" in small groups, ask them to write a letter directly to that thing, similar to Jaz Sufi's "Letter to Slam Poetry," where they use details and metaphors to describe and pay tribute to the thing that brought them out of a dark time.

“FAMILY TREE” by Joaquin Zihuatanejo

They say fruit don’t fall far from the family tree
And I hope that’s not true
Used to think my mother was a willow
And that you were an oak
But the tree I fell from is crooked and broke
Split in two by lightening
That’s why there’s nothing more frightening
Than sound of my raised voice
in the direction of my youngest daughter
You see, I don’t ever want her to look at me
The way I imagine I’d look you father
Right before I stare you in the face
And ask you
How could you leave me in a place
Where oak trees are a scarce as two parent families?
Where the first word a hungry child learns is please
Ain’t no shade under a family tree
When a father leaves
Just boughs as broke
As the vows you spoke
The night you plucked me into existence
They say a tree can only withstand so much resistance
I wonder if you cut my heart in two
And counted the rings from the center to its edge
Would equal the number of years it’s been since you left?
You were the taking tree
Took everything you could from her
Took everything you could from me
Left my mother’s arms looking for your limbs
And grasping only air
That’s why she didn’t mind ensnaring men
    who only pretended to care
Somewhere between the muck and mire
Of a brown girl’s fear and white boy’s desire
Is where my roots took hold
I was less than a year old
Nothing more than a sapling
When you left me under the shade of the woman
    my mother used to be
Don’t you see father,
This is the story of a boy, a dull ax, and a tree
It’s taken me years to cut you out of me
Can you imagine the cacophony?

The sound of the blade striking against you
The sound of a family being cut in two
And now that I'm through
I find I'm just as stumped as you
Wondering what to do with the remnants of you?
Maybe carve one of your limbs into a cane—
No, I could never lean on you
Maybe I could sculpt you into a blood red violin—
No, I wouldn't know where to begin
To find the music in any of this
So I'll carve a coffin from your carcass
Give your absence some purpose
And I'll fill it with poems
Most of them true
And a few of them lies
I could write about your hands
And her eyes
Some will be hellos
But most will be goodbyes
And I'll cart you far away from me
Give you a proper burial at sea
And though my muscles may ache from all that weight
I'll walk you out beyond the break
Let the tide take you away from me

Maybe then we'll both be free
Maybe then the world can see

That I am the fruit
And you are the tree
I fell from you
And you failed me
I am the wave
She is the sea
I break away
And she breaks me
I am not you
Though you are me
I am the fruit
That fell far
From the tree

LESSON PLAN: "Family Tree" by Joaquin Zihuatanejo

CONTEXT: Begin by noting the powerful extended metaphor that Joaquin Zihuatanejo uses throughout this poem. His "family tree" imagery deepens with every line as he explores the roots of his family and uses allusion to refer to his father as the "The Taking Tree" (instead of "The Giving Tree". Side note: It may be worth sharing Shel Silverstein's The Giving Tree here.) Zihuatanejo continues to imagine his family as a tree that was split the same way his parents split. He then builds a poem around that idea of a broken tree and ends with this intentional cliché: "I am the fruit that fell far from the tree." In some ways, Zihuatanejo takes a hackneyed phrase and makes it fresh, imagistic, and deeply moving. It's also worth noting that although poetry does not have to rhyme, Zihuatanejo uses a lot of very focused and intentional rhyme to give this poem a musical quality almost like a lullaby that a parent might sing to his or her child.

DISCUSSION: Begin by asking students to extract from this poem all of the visual imagery that refers to a tree, so they can see how powerfully and consistently Zihuatanejo used his metaphor throughout the poem. This allows readers to focus on a singular image while the deeper meaning of the poem is explored metaphorically.

In addition, consider asking students to discuss their own family and if they were like trees, what would they look like? Would they be like "The Giving Tree" that gives and gives until it's nothing but a stump or would they be more like "The Taking Tree?" What do family's give us and what do they take away from us? Have students explore that question in small groups or as a class.

WRITING ACTIVITY: Ask your students to think of an object like a tree. It could be a tree as well or another object found in nature or it could be a car, a bus, an old sweater, or a house, etc. Ask them to think of one thing—anything—and then use it as an extended metaphor to describe their family (or friend group). For example, one might begin, "My family is like an old 1962 Studebaker Lark that runs but breaks down a lot." Once they have a first line that compares the subject (family) to an object (car), they should continue to explore all the ways this singular, extended metaphor connects to their family, for better or for worse.

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