

Teaching Guide
***Water Lessons* by Lisa Dordal**

Introduction

This teaching guide provides discussion questions for every poem in *Water Lessons*. The questions are not meant to be exhaustive – they are meant to cover important material and can easily be used in conjunction with other questions as appropriate. For some questions, participants are encouraged to do online research about a particular topic (racism, alcoholism, dementia, etc.). In these cases, the word **research** appears in bold. Additionally, a **writing exercise** is included for every poem.

Except in the case of research and writing prompts, this guide does not include specific classroom activities (such as pair-share or small-group work). However, the discussion questions can easily be paired with any such activity of the teacher's choosing.

This guide has not been developed with one specific age group in mind. Thus, some questions might need to be re-formulated based on the age and skill level of the participants.

If you have suggestions for how to improve this teaching guide or if you want to share anything that worked particularly well in your class as you used this guide, I would love to hear from you!

In the meantime, happy teaching and learning!

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SECTION I

“Welcome,” p. 3

- 1) Read the poem “Welcome” and write down as many themes or ideas as you can identify from the poem. Try to come up with at least eight. A few possible themes are: denial, grief, identity, dissociation, self-harm, etc.
- 2) How would you describe/characterize the mother in the poem?
- 3) How would you describe/characterize the speaker in the poem? Are there any hints in the poem about the ways the speaker might have struggled as a child? How would you describe the relationship between the speaker and the speaker’s mother?
- 4) One possible theme in the poem is the tension between “strangeness” and familiarity or between strangers and people we know (or think we know). In what way is the mother familiar to the speaker and in what way is the mother a stranger to the speaker—or even possibly to herself? Related to this, in what way might the line “never invite strangers into your room” be ironic?
- 5) The poem references at least two kinds of cultural and/or religious messaging that the mother (and perhaps the speaker as well) received and seems to have been impacted by. Identify at least one of these cultural or religious narratives and discuss their significance to the poem.
- 6) The final couplet begins in the voice of the woman on the welcome channel. How does the couplet end? Is it clear who is saying “Nice story” in the final line of the poem? If it is ambiguous, what might be the purpose of this ambiguity?

Creative Exercise:

In this poem, the speaker experiences multiple events and dimensions of time simultaneously. Spend a few minutes coming up with a list of events that you (in your own life) or your speaker (in an imagined life) have experienced at different times (i.e., not simultaneously). Then spend seven minutes doing a free-write about these experiences. Do not edit as you write, and try not to pick up your pen or pencil. After you’ve finished, take what you’ve written and try to shape your thoughts into a poem in which your speaker experiences the past and present at the same time (or the present and the future, etc.).

“Water Lessons,” p. 6

- 1) Read the poem “Water Lessons” and write down as many themes as you can identify from the poem. Try to come up with at least eight. A few possible themes are: memory, regeneration, drowning.
- 2) What do we learn about the speaker’s mother in the first stanza – i.e., how do the details from this stanza further our understanding of the mother?
- 3) If you don’t know what alcoholism is or what it might be like for someone to grow up in an alcoholic family, do some **research** online. Then put what you learned in conversation with the poem.
- 4) What do you think is the significance of the word “Heart” appearing on its own line?
- 5) What do you think is the significance of the Titanic image in the poem?
- 6) How do you think the speaker feels about the “sound of ice against glass”? Do you think everyone hears this sound the same way? What “story” is connected to this sound for the speaker and how would you describe the emotional impact of this sound on the speaker?
- 7) Re-read the last three stanzas (starting with “In Leningrad...”). How do these stanzas enhance our understanding of the relationship and connection between the speaker and the speaker’s mother?
- 8) What do you think is the significance of the title “Water Lessons”? What comes to mind for you when you hear these words? How does the poem work with or against your own associations with the title?

Creative Exercise:

Make a list of sounds you remember – or still experience – from your own childhood. These can be sounds that make you happy or wistful or angry or any other emotion. Then pick one of these sounds and do a free-write about it – i.e., spend seven minutes writing as fast as you can about anything that comes to mind when you think about the sound. Do not edit as you write and try not to pick up your pen or pencil. When you are finished, read over what you wrote. Did you learn anything new about yourself in this process or anything new about the sound itself? If you want to go further, try to shape your words into a poem.

“Backstory,” p. 8

- 1) Read the poem “Backstory” and write down as many themes as you can identify from the poem. Try to come up with at least five.
- 2) How would you describe the relationship between “things seen and unseen” in the speaker’s life?
- 3) How would you describe the “gods” of the speaker’s childhood? How do you think these gods and the religious teachings she received as a child impacted the speaker?
- 4) Why do you think the speaker characterizes the male voices as being like a “swarm of bees”? What is the significance of the image of bees as well as of the word itself?
- 5) How does the reference to owls create meaning in the poem? What are some characteristics of owls that might relate to the message of the poem?
- 6) Poets choose their words carefully and it’s good to get in the habit of asking what kind of “work” certain words are doing in a poem. What kind of work do you think the word “memorized” is doing in the poem? What does this word suggest about the speaker’s relationship to the religious tradition of her upbringing?
- 7) In between the word “statistics” and the reference to “one in three,” is the line “God of God, Light of Light” which comes from the Christian Nicene Creed. What do you think is the significance of this juxtaposition between mathematical language and religious language?
- 8) What do you think is the significance of the number three in the reference to “one in three women // assaulted”? What might the speaker be saying about the relationship between religious narratives that use male-centric language to refer to God and the way many women in the world are treated?

Creative Exercise:

Make a list of stories or narratives you have learned so far in your life. These might be religious narratives, cultural narratives, scientific narratives, etc. Then pick one particular narrative and do a seven-minute free-write in which you wrestle with the narrative by pushing back against certain aspects of it and/or embracing certain aspects. Do not edit as you write and try not to pick up your pen or pencil. When you are finished, read over what you wrote. Did you learn anything new about yourself in this process? If you want to go further, try to shape your words into a poem.

“Ars Poetica,” p. 9

- 1) Read the poem “*Ars Poetica*” and write down as many tensions as you can identify from the poem. Try to come up with at least five. Tension in literature refers to opposing ideas or elements. Sometimes tension in a poem indicates the presence of something ominous or threatening.
- 2) This poem is in conversation with the ending of the Christian story found in the Gospel of Mark. Read Chapter 16:1-13 from the Gospel of Mark (easy to find online). In what way is this poem in conversation with the ending of the Gospel of Mark?
- 3) How is the meaning of this poem enhanced given its placement immediately after “Backstory”?
- 4) Who do you think the “we” is referring to in the fifth line? And how does the reference to closed off “rooms” in this same line relate back to the poem “Backstory”?
- 5) What kind of work is the word “just” doing in the last line of the poem? How would this line be different without that word? In other words, what might this word reveal about the father’s relationship to the speaker and to the speaker’s mother?
- 6) Why do you think the speaker wants to believe “there is a door”? What might this door be a reference to?
- 7) The phrase *ars poetica* is Latin for “art of poetry” and, as a type of poem, is often used by a poet to shed light on why they feel compelled to write. Why do you think this particular poet feels compelled to write? Given the poems you’ve read so far, what does this poet seem to be wrestling with?

Creative Exercise:

If you are a writer, think about what it is that compels you to write. Then try writing your own *ars poetica* poem. You can start with a seven-minute free-write, if that helps. If you don’t consider yourself to be a writer, try to assume the persona of a writer and do a free-write in which you explore what compels them to write.

“Underpinnings,” p. 10

- 1) Read the poem “Underpinnings” and write down as many themes and/or tensions as you can identify from the poem. Try to come up with at least five.
- 2) How did you feel after reading this poem – particularly after the third stanza?
- 3) We now know for certain that the speaker of these poems is a girl/woman (though you might have picked up clues in earlier poems). What is the poem suggesting about the relationship between the speaker and the speaker’s father?
- 4) What do you think is the significance of the poem’s title?
- 5) This poem is written in the third person whereas all the poems that come before this one are written in the first person. Why do you think the poet uses third person for this poem?

Creative Exercise:

Make a list of experiences from your life that you consider to be significant and maybe even difficult to think/write about. Then pick one experience and do a seven-minute free-write about it from the third-person perspective. In other words, imagine that the experience happened to someone else. When you’re done, look over what you’ve written. Did anything you wrote surprise you? What did it feel like to write about one of your own experiences from the third-person perspective? Did it free you up to write things you might have had trouble writing had you used the first-person perspective?

“Grief,” p. 11

- 1) **Before you read this poem:** Think about the griefs you have experienced in your own life. These could be griefs associated with the loss of a loved one or a pet or grief associated with moving to a new city or not achieving a particular goal you had set for yourself or grief associated with a physical injury, etc. Jot down as many images or descriptions of your grief as you can.

Then read the poem. Was there any overlap between your own images of grief and those of the poet?

- 2) How would you characterize the speaker’s experience of grief? Are there images in this poem that you found particularly compelling or that spoke to you personally?

Creative Exercise:

Pick one of your own experiences of grief (from above) and see if you can add to the images/descriptions. Then see if you can shape your images/descriptions into a poem.

“Of One Substance,” p. 13

- 1) Read the poem “Of One Substance” and write down as many themes and/or tensions as you can identify from the poem. Try to come up with at least five.
- 2) What do you think is the significance of the title of this poem in connection to the poem “Backstory”? In what ways are these poems connected to each other?
- 3) What might the bees represent in this poem?
- 4) What kind of work is the word “runs” doing in this poem? What do you think the girl is running from?
- 5) Who or what in the speaker’s life has thought itself “divine”? How has this impacted the speaker’s understanding of herself?
- 6) This poem is written from the third-person perspective whereas many of the poems that come before this are written from the first-person perspective. Why do you think the poet uses the third-person perspective for this poem? How do you think this poem connects to “Underpinnings” which is also written in the third-person?

Creative Exercise:

Make a list of experiences from your own life that you consider to be significant and maybe even difficult to think/write about. Then pick one experience and do a seven-minute free-write about it from the second-person perspective (“you”). When you’re done, look over what you’ve written. Did anything you wrote surprise you? What did it feel like to write about one of your own experiences from the second-person perspective? Did it free you up to write things you might have had trouble writing had you used the first-person perspective?

“Interview,” p. 14

- 1) Read the poem “Interview” and write down as many themes and/or tensions as you can identify from the poem. Try to come up with at least five.
- 2) How does the form of this poem – the interview format – create meaning in the poem? What would be lost if the poem had not been written in this format?
- 3) Why do you think the speaker says, at the end of the poem, “It scared me. It didn’t scare me” before admitting in the last line that it really did scare her? How would the ending be different if the speaker had admitted her fear right away?

Creative Exercise:

Pretend you are being interviewed about your own life. You can begin with the first question used in the poem – or you can come up with a new beginning question. Write down as many questions and answers as you can in seven minutes. Then re-read what you wrote. Did anything you wrote surprise you? Did you learn anything new about yourself? You can also do this exercise using a completely fictional person as the interviewee.

“Meditations on My Mother’s Death,” p. 16

- 1) Read “Meditations on My Mother’s Death” and write down as many themes and/or tensions as you can identify from the poem. Try to come up with at least five.
- 2) What new information do we learn about the speaker from this poem? And what new information do we learn about the household / family in which the speaker grew up?
- 3) Are there any particular images that stood out to you or spoke to you personally?
- 4) How does the phrase “energy is never gained or lost” contribute meaning to the poem? What does this phrase tell us about how the speaker views her mother’s death and her own childhood?
- 5) What does the line “I tell myself to be happy” reveal about the speaker?

Creative Exercises:

- 1) All of the lines listed below appear in the poem. Pick one of these lines and re-write it at the top of a blank piece of paper. Then do a seven-minute free-write starting with the line you picked. After you’ve finished writing, read over what you wrote. Did anything you wrote surprise you? Or did you learn anything new about yourself?

In the kitchen there was a boy
Photographs make the dead living
In a recent photo, taken by a stranger
I tell myself to be happy. I tell myself

- 2) Spend a few minutes thinking about the ways your memories from childhood impact your behavior and feelings as an adult. Then pick one particular memory from childhood and write as much (and as quickly) as you can about it without picking up your pen/pencil. When you’re done, read over what you wrote and see if you can shape some of it into a poem.

“My Mother, Arriving,” p. 18

- 1) Read “My Mother, Arriving” and write down as many themes and/or tensions as you can identify from the poem. Try to come up with at least five.
- 2) Are there any particular images in this poem that stood out to you or spoke to you personally?
- 3) What do we learn about the father’s role in the speaker’s family – and in his new family as well?
- 4) This poem is written in three sections, with the second section being a kind of interruption of the speaker’s meditations about her mother. What is the purpose of this second section? What would be lost if the poem didn’t have this section?
- 5) What might the poem be saying about the relationship between life and art?
- 6) Why do you think the poet decided to end this section of the book with this poem – particularly since it has the word “arriving” in it?

Creative Exercise:

Take one of the following three phrases – my mother, arriving; my mother, leaving; my mother, not going away – and replace the word “mother” with something or someone significant in your own life. You might think in terms of concepts – “my sadness, arriving,” for example – or in terms of a particular role that someone plays in your life. Then do a seven-minute free-write in which you describe this person or concept as arriving and leaving and not going away. When you’re done, read back over what you wrote and see if you can shape some of it into a poem.

SECTION II

“Postcards from the 70s,” p. 23

- 1) Read all seven sections of this poem. Jot down one or two tensions – instances of conflict or threat – from each poem.
- 2) The first poem/postcard in the series speaks very nonchalantly about a situation that could have escalated (and perhaps did escalate) into a dangerous and damaging situation for the speaker. Why is a nonchalant tone so effective for this particular topic?
- 3) In the second poem/postcard, there is a marked tension between the threat of war and the role of play in childhood. Think about your own childhood. Are there examples from your own childhood (either currently or in the past) when the playfulness of childhood transpired against a backdrop of violence or war? How aware were you at the time of this backdrop?
- 4) In the third postcard, the speaker makes an allusion to a story from the first chapter of the Gospel of Luke. Read this chapter from Luke (available online) and discuss the role of the allusion in this poem. What might this allusion be saying about the societal expectations for girls and women during the time period in which the speaker grew up?
- 5) There are several different power dynamics referred to in the fifth postcard related to age, gender, and race, as the speaker recounts a painful memory from high school. Identify these power dynamics; then discuss the various power dynamics that you have experienced in your own life. In particular, think about the ways you might have been a perpetrator in certain situations and a victim in other situations.
- 6) Think back about the poems “Backstory” and “Underpinnings.” How does the sixth poem/postcard relate to these earlier poems?
- 7) In the seventh poem/postcard, the adult speaker reflects on a friendship she had with a Black woman during her teenage years. In what way was race handled differently across the two households – that of the speaker’s and that of the speaker’s friend? Related to this, what is the significance of the phrase “as if to be polite” in the fourth stanza. How is this phrase different from saying “to be polite”? In other words, how does the speaker problematize the mother’s perceptions of politeness related to race?

Creative Exercise:

Each line in the fourth poem/postcard begins with the words “My mother tells me.” Do a free-write in which you begin every sentence with these same words (feel free to substitute someone else for mother). Write for about seven minutes. Don’t edit as you write and try not to stop at all until the time is up. Then re-read what you wrote. Did you learn anything new about yourself by doing this exercise? Or about someone else?

“I Remember” p. 30

- 1) Read “I Remember” and identify as many tensions or conflicts as you can from the poem. Are there any that you have experienced in your own life?
- 2) What new information do we get from this poem with respect to how the speaker thought about herself as a teenager?
- 3) In the seventh stanza, the speaker says she wanted to hug the black guy from gym class after he told her “you white people all look alike.” Why do you think she wanted to hug him?

Creative Exercise:

Nearly every line in this poem begins with the words “I remember.” Do a free-write in which you begin every sentence with these same words. Write for about seven minutes. Don’t edit as you write and try not to stop at all until the time is up. Then re-read what you wrote. Did you learn anything new about yourself by doing this exercise?

SECTION III

“My Mother Is a Peaceful Ghost,” p. 35

- 1) Read “My Mother Is a Peaceful Ghost” and identify as many themes and/or tensions as you can. Try to come up with at least five.
- 2) Look up the lyrics to the song “You Are My Sunshine.” Did anything about the lyrics surprise you? What kind of work is this song doing in the poem?
- 3) Given the references to alcoholism in previous poems, what do you think is the significance of “her // own body, a country foreign to her.”
- 4) What kind of theological questions is the speaker raising in this poem? How might these questions relate to the speaker’s experience of growing up in an alcoholic family?
- 5) What is ironic about the line “diluted into nothingness. My mother”?
- 6) The poem ends with: “She tried to stop. And didn’t.” What do you think the “and didn’t” refers to? Is it clear or is the poem intentionally ambiguous here?
- 7) Except for two lines, the entire poem is written in couplets. What do you think is the significance of the two single lines – i.e., how does their “singleness” create meaning in the poem?

Creative Exercise:

Spend five minutes making a list of people that you feel haunted by – i.e., people who are living that you can’t stop thinking about or people who are no longer living. These can be people you know/knew well or people you’ve only heard or read about. After you have your list, read back over it and choose one person on the list to write about. Then write “In my dreams [fill in name/role] keeps [fill in verb phrase]” at the top of a blank sheet of paper and do a seven-minute free-write based on this line. Try not to edit yourself; write as quickly as you can without picking up your pen. See if you can write for at least three pages. Then re-read what you wrote. Did you learn anything new about yourself by doing this exercise? Or about the person you wrote about?

“Housekeeper,” p. 37

- 1) Read “Housekeeper” and identify as many themes and/or tensions as you can. Try to come up with at least five. Think especially about themes related to race and racism.
- 2) **Research** Claudia Rankine online. What are some of Rankine’s primary concerns as a writer? How does the Rankine epigraph inform your reading of the poem?
- 3) The practice of redlining is alluded to in this poem. If you don’t already know about redlining, do some **research** online to find out more about it.
- 4) How does what you learned (or already know) about redlining impact your reading of the poem?
- 5) Towards the end of the poem, the speaker says she lived in a “nice” neighborhood. Why do you think “nice” is in quotation marks?
- 6) If you don’t already know about the use of dogs in the civil rights movement of the 1960s, **research** this topic online. How does what you learned (or already know) about this topic impact your reading of the poem?
- 7) If you don’t already know about systemic or institutional racism, **research** this topic online. How does what you learned inform your reading of the line “But how good could any of us be?”
- 8) Read the following article about domestic workers in Chicago:
<http://www.encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org/pages/386.html>

How does the information in this article inform you reading of the poem?
- 9) How would you describe the relationship between Willa and the speaker’s family? What do you think were some of the unspoken complexities about this relationship?

Writing Exercise:

Spend ten minutes making a list of anything you can think of that relates to your own experience of race. For example, what race do you identify yourself as? How old were you when you first became aware of your own race and of the concept of race itself? Have you ever talked to someone of a different race about the topic of race? Have you ever experienced racism directly or indirectly? Have you ever said or done something that you now realize might have been racist?

“Horses,” p. 39

- 1) Read “Horses” and identify as many themes and/or tensions as you can. Try to come up with at least five.
- 2) Do any of the themes you came up with overlap with any of the themes you’ve come up with for the poems that mostly focus on the speaker’s mother?
- 3) Have you ever known anyone who had dementia? Or do you know anyone presently who has dementia? What is it like for you to interact with this person? What are some of the challenges in your relationship with this person because of the dementia? What, if any, are some of the joys?

If you don’t know what dementia is or what it might be like for someone to experience dementia, do some **research** online. Then put what you learned in conversation with the poem.

- 4) Horses figure prominently in the poem. What role do they play – what is their significance to the poem?

Creative Exercise:

Spend five minutes making a list of those times in your life when you “laughed out of joy, not obligation.” In other words, when your experience of laughter was completely joy-filled. Then pick one of these experiences and do a free write about the experience – i.e., write as quickly as you can without editing and without picking up your pen. See if you can write for at least three pages. Then re-read what you wrote. Did you learn anything new about yourself by doing this exercise? Or about the experience you wrote about?

“Primer,” p. 41

- 1) Read “Primer” and identify as many themes and/or tensions as you can. Try to come up with at least five. Think especially about themes related to race and racism.
- 2) The words “summer” and “red” are mentioned in the second stanza. Some readers might see an allusion to Red Summer here. If you don’t already know about what happened in this country during the summer of 1919, do some **research** online to find out. After you’ve done your **research**, think about these questions:
 - a. How might the casual tone of this stanza be in conversation with this problematic period in our nation’s history? I.e., in what way might this connection be productive in the poem?
 - b. Do you think the author intended for readers to make this connection?
- 3) There is a reference in the fourth stanza to the white speaker grieving for a tree. If you don’t know about the history of lynching in this country, do some **research** online. Here are a few good places to start:

<https://www.history.com/tag/lynching>

<https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/emmett-lynching-america/>

<https://eji.org/reports/lynching-in-america/>

After you’ve done your **research**, re-visit the poem. What do you think is the significance of this line-break: “Which means you haven’t grieved yet // for a tree.”

- 4) There is a reference in the poem to the speaker’s body being able to fit everywhere – in cupboards, sideboards, etc. In the poem, these images allude to a joyful and playful time in the white speaker’s life. However, there is a long history in this country of Black people having to hide and contort their bodies into painful, unnatural shapes in order to escape the terrors of enslavement or in order to flee the south after slavery had been constitutionally abolished. Do some **research** online about the history of the Underground Railroad in this country and the history of the Great Migration during the 20th century. After you’ve done your **research**, think about these questions:
 - a. How might the casual tone of the stanzas in which the speaker describes playing Twelve O’clock the Witch Comes Out (a form of hide-and-seek) be in tension with a problematic period in our nation’s history? Do you think this tension is production/useful in the poem?
 - b. Do you think the author intended for readers to make these connections? And does author intention always matter?

- 5) **Research** the use and history of African American stereotypes in this country. Which stereotypes relate to the reference to “barbarians” in the poem?

Stereotyping is a dangerous practice and yet research now shows that we are all guilty at times of implicit bias. What is implicit bias and what are some things people can do to counteract it?

- 6) There is a reference in the poem to Pippi painting her face black. **Research** the origins and history of blackface in this country.
- 7) Discuss the significance of the phrase “white imagination.” What does “white imagination” mean? Do some **research** online to find out more. For even further investigation, **research** the concept of race itself. In what ways are racial categories real and in what ways are they not real?
- 8) The poem ends with a reference to the Middle Passage. Make a list of the things you know about the Middle Passage. After you’ve made your list, do some **research** online to find out more. Then discuss the significance of the last three lines of the poem. How do you think the speaker feels about herself at the end of the poem? What, if anything, is the speaker asking readers to do?
- 9) Read the following articles. The first one is about Pippi Longstocking and the other three are about the Laura Ingalls Wilder books, which also contain racist depictions. What, in your view, should be done about literature that contains racist depictions?

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/nov/09/pippi-longstocking-books-racism>

<https://www.npr.org/2018/06/25/623184440/little-house-on-the-controversy-laura-ingalls-wilders-name-removed-from-book-awa>

<https://www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters/what-should-be-done-about-racist-depictions-in-the-little-house-books/16587/>

<https://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/2018/06/27/laura-ingalls-wilder-book-award-little-house-prairie-racist-column/734103002/>

Writing Exercise:

Spend ten minutes making a list of anything you can think of that relates to your own experience of race. For example, what race do you identify yourself as? How old were you when you first became aware of your own race and of the concept of race? Have you ever talked to someone of a different race about the topic of race? When you hear the word “racism,” what do you think of? Are there experiences from your own life that you look back on now and view differently, with respect to race? Then do a seven-minute free-write about one of the things from your list.

“Love Poem,” p. 43

- 1) Read “Love Poem” and identify as many themes and/or tensions as you can. Try to come up with at least five.
- 2) In the poem, there are several references – some explicit, some implicit – to boundaries. Identify as many references as you can. What do you think is the significance of boundaries in the poem? And in the speaker’s life?
- 3) In what way might a bird’s open beak be like a “red infinity”?
- 4) What is the significance of the speaker’s *wrist* forgiving the speaker? Are there times in your own life when you think of your body as being separate from you? Are there ways in which making such a distinction can be helpful? Or damaging?
- 5) The following poem appears in Dordal’s first book, *Mosaic of the Dark*. Do you see any connections between this poem and “Love Poem”?

Last Poem about My Mother

This is my mother
watching her heart—

dark, liquid motion
on the screen beside her.

How she called it
beautiful. This is

please and *thank you*,
and softens the wounds

of strangers. This is a body’s
last words; what is left

after fire. This is cavities
in the bones of a bird

that make flight possible,
and flits unseen

through every gesture and word.
This is my mother

and a way out of my mother;
a place I can say

that I left.

- 6) What do you think “Love Poem” is saying about the relationship between the speaker and her mother? Do you think they were both equally aware of each other’s pain?
- 7) When you hear the words “love poem,” what do you think of? In other words, were you surprised by the content of this poem after reading the title?
- 8) Read Sylvia Plath’s poem “Tulips” (online). Are there any connections you can make between the last stanza of her poem and “Love Poem?”

Creative Exercise:

Think about your own body. Spend a few minutes writing down as many parts of your body as you can think of. Then think about how much your body does during every day of your life, how much energy it expends to keep itself running. Do a seven-minute free-write about one part of your body in which you express gratitude for that part.

“Sheltering in Place,” p. 44

- 1) Read “Sheltering in Place” and identify as many themes and/or tensions as you can. Try to come up with at least five.
- 2) Why do you think stories are so important for the speaker? Think about your own relationship to and experience of stories. Are there stories that you need in your life? Do you think stories always have to be literally true in order to be meaningful? Can stories that aren’t literally true be as or even more meaningful than stories that are literally true? In other words, what might the poem be saying about the power and even the necessity of imagination?
- 3) The words “angels” and “angles” are nearly identical but have very different meanings. In the poem, angels is “correct” and angles is not. And yet from the incorrect word, emerges an equally compelling narrative. Can you think of an example in your own life in which an error yielded something as valuable as the “correct” version?
- 4) Have you ever needed to be reminded of joy in your own life? Or have you ever felt not quite yourself – off-kilter somehow – and needed to be reminded by a friend or family member (or even a total stranger) of who you really are? Have you ever done the same thing for another person – i.e., helped another person regain their balance?
- 5) Have you ever had the experience of looking into the eyes of another kind of animal (i.e., not human)? If so, what was the experience like? Why do you think Darwin said that the eye gave him a cold shudder?
- 6) Discuss the significance of the last three stanzas.

Creative Exercise:

The speaker in the poem says she wants a story that “ends in joy” and then proceeds to describe that story. Do a seven-minute free-write in which you imagine your own version of a story that “ends in joy” (or, if you prefer, ends in some other way). Then re-read what you wrote. Did you learn anything new about yourself by doing this exercise?

“Love Poem for My Father,” p. 46

- 1) Read “Love Poem for My Father” and identify as many themes and/or tensions as you can. Try to come up with at least five.
- 2) If you don’t know what dementia is or what it might be like for someone to experience dementia, do some **research** online. Then put what you learned in conversation with the poem.
- 3) Look up the word *signature*. What are the scientific (geologic, geochemical) meanings of this word? How do these meanings relate to the speaker’s relationship with her father?
- 4) At the end of the poem, the speaker holds one of her father’s hands and takes a picture of just their hands. Why do you think the speaker takes a picture of just their hands?
- 5) What do you think “different from everything that came before” is referring to? In what way might the speaker’s relationship with her father be different now from what it was when she was younger?
- 6) The reference to something happening “*here*, major, irreversible” is, on the surface, a reference to geologic activities. What else might it refer to?
- 7) What might this poem be saying about how time affects human relationships?
- 8) The poem seems to be saying something about how a person’s perspective (i.e., literal viewing point) can affect a person’s feelings. In other words, the closer one is (emotionally or physically) to a particular situation, the stronger a person’s feelings about the situation might be. In the poem, the speaker seems to feel comforted by imagining herself far from earth. Why do you think the speaker would want to distance herself from the earth? And what else might the speaker be wanting to distance herself from, perhaps in an effort to experience healing?

Creative Exercise:

The speaker in this poem uses a geology metaphor – “signature of dark rock different from what is above or below” – to describe the change in her relationship with her father. Pick a scientific discipline – chemistry, biology, physics, botany, etc. – and spend about ten minutes **researching** online anything from that field that interests you. This could be a particular kind of flower or tree that you’re interested in or a chemistry theorem or a particular animal. Follow your interests as you do your research and take notes about anything that you learn or that seems particularly interesting to you. Then, after you’ve done your research, write a love poem (for anyone or anything) in which you use a metaphor that was inspired by your research.

“A white girl describes her neighborhood, 1980,” p. 47

- 1) Read “A white girl describes her neighborhood, 1980” and identify as many themes and/or tensions as you can. Try to come up with at least five.
- 2) The practice of redlining is alluded to in this poem. If you don’t already know about redlining, do some **research** online to find out more about it.
- 3) In line 8, “isolated, detached” seems to refer not only to the speaker’s neighborhood but to the speaker herself. What do you think the speaker was detached *from*? Do you think, for example, that the speaker learned anything about the concept of the “white imagination” when she was growing up? Or about her own whiteness?
- 4) Stories can be salvific and healing. They can provide hope and joy, for example, as we saw in the poem “Sheltering in Place.” But stories can also distort and erase and inflict pain. In light of this, what do you think is the significance of the “imaginary waters // with real waters inside.” See the note on page 74 for information about these lines that might be helpful.
- 5) The poem makes allusions to the slave trade and the Middle Passage. **Research** these topics and find the allusions in the poem. Then discuss the significance of these lines (and of the line-break): “the living shackled to the dead. White girl // carrying herself pleasantly. *Like an island.*”
- 6) What do you think is the significance of the last line in the poem? How do you think the speaker feels about herself now as an adult with respect to race and racism?

Creative Exercise:

Make a list of stories (however you interpret this word) from your own life that offer hope and joy and a list of stories (perhaps stories from our larger culture) that have created pain for you. Pick one story and write about it for seven minutes. Don’t edit as you write and try not to stop at all until the time is up. Then re-read what you wrote. Did you learn anything new about yourself by doing this exercise? Or about someone else?

“Survival Guide for a Depressive” p. 48

- 1) Read “Survival Guide for a Depressive” and identify as many themes and/or tensions as you can. Try to come up with at least five.
- 2) Are there any images in this poem that you found comforting – or not comforting?
- 3) Every stanza in the poem begins with a verb. What do you think is the significance of this?
- 4) If you were to write your own “survival guide,” what would you include?

Creative Exercise:

Write a poem in which you begin every stanza with the verbs that begin every stanza in “Survival Guide for a Depressive”: draw, pretend, learn, lie, think, raise, watch. Then re-read what you wrote. Did you learn anything new about yourself by doing this exercise? Or about someone else?

“Broken Arm,” p. 50

- 1) Read “Broken Arm” and identify as many themes and/or tensions as you can. Try to come up with at least five.
- 2) How many different “stories” can you identify in this poem? Discuss how these stories all connect with one another.
- 3) In what way might the future seem like a house – either for you personally or for the speaker in the poem? What are some other ways to think about the future – i.e., some other metaphors?
- 4) In the poem there is a reference to the divine being “everywhere and nowhere.” How might this description also relate to the experience of grief?
- 5) What do you think is the significance of the reference to “three hearts” – i.e., why three and not, say, two or four? Does the number three have any particular symbolic significance?
- 6) There are two one-lined stanzas in the poem. Why do you think these particular lines are on their own – i.e., not part of a couplet?

Creative Exercise:

Make a list of experiences from your own life that you consider to be significant in some way. Pick one of these experiences and make a list of other “stories” or events that are associated with this experience. Then spend seven minutes writing as much and as fast as you can about your main story and the sub-stories. Don’t edit as you write and try not to stop at all until the time is up. Then re-read what you wrote. Did you learn anything new about yourself by doing this exercise? Or about someone else?

“Dementia Bus,” p. 52

- 1) Read “Dementia Bus” and identify as many themes and/or tensions as you can. Try to come up with at least five.
- 2) If you don’t know what dementia is or what it might be like for someone to experience dementia, do some **research** online. Then put what you learned in conversation with the poem.
- 3) Are there any images in the poem that particularly stood out to you?
- 4) How would you characterize the ending of the poem? In other words, how do you think the speaker feels as she’s driving away and “tak[ing] the birds with [her]?”

Creative Exercise:

Make a list of experiences from your life in which you felt confused and disoriented or in which you felt trapped and wanted to escape but couldn’t. Then pick one of these experiences and spend seven minutes writing as much and as fast as you can about the experience. Don’t edit as you write and try not to stop at all until the time is up. Then re-read what you wrote. Did you learn anything new about yourself by doing this exercise? Or about someone else?

“My Mother Speaks to Me,” p. 55

- 1) Read “My Mother Speaks to Me” and identify as many themes and/or tensions as you can. Try to come up with at least five.
- 2) Have you ever had the experience of someone looking towards you but as if you weren’t there? How did this make you feel?
- 3) What do you think the reference to alewives adds to the poem? If you don’t know about the alewives of the Great Lakes, do some **research** online. Then discuss what you think their significance is to the poem.
- 4) What do you think about the reference to “mother poems” and the distinction that the speaker’s friend makes between “mother poems” and “poems about life and death?”
- 5) The poem ends with the hallway suddenly being empty. Who do you think has disappeared from the hallway – the speaker or the ghost-mother?

Creative Exercise:

Make a list of people—alive or deceased—who have been important to you in your life. For each of these people, identify the role they play or have played in your life. For example, mother, father, sibling, teacher, minister, etc. Then pick one of these roles and do a free-write for seven minutes starting with the words “My [insert role] speaks to me....” You might imagine this person speaking to you from the past or future or even through a dream. Don’t edit as you write and try not to stop at all until the time is up. Then re-read what you wrote. Did you learn anything new about yourself by doing this exercise? Or about someone else?

“Daughter Poem,” p. 57

- 1) Read “Daughter Poem” and identify as many themes and/or tensions as you can. Try to come up with at least five.
- 2) Have you ever had the experience of describing a dream to someone and then realizing the details don’t make sense as you’re describing them but they very much did during the dream? How do you think this experience might relate to some of the other poems in the book?
- 3) What might this poem be saying about the power of imagination?

Creative Exercise:

Make a list of places, concepts, experiences, or people that you would like to “see.” These can be real or imaginary. Pick one and write as much as you can about it without lifting up your pen. Then try shaping what you’ve written into a poem in which every stanza or line begins with the word *sometimes*. Did you learn anything new about yourself by doing this exercise? Or about someone else?

SECTION IV

“The Last Time,” p. 61

- 1) Read “The Last Time” and identify as many themes and/or tensions as you can.
- 2) What do you think is the significance of the speaker’s mother being in a car – and in the passenger’s seat in particular?
- 3) What do you think the speaker means by “something in her already beginning to change?”
- 4) Do some **research** online about how seeds sense light. Then put what you learned in conversation with the poem. What might it mean, for example, for the speaker to think of herself as a seed and her mother as the light?
- 5) Discuss the significance of the final line.

Creative Exercise:

Make a list of places, experiences, or people that you saw and/or experienced for a final time. These can be real or imaginary. Then pick one and write as much as you can about it without lifting up your pen. Did you learn anything new about yourself by doing this exercise? Or about someone else?

“New Bird,” p. 62

- 1) Read “New Bird” and identify as many themes and/or tensions as you can. Try to come up with at least five.
- 2) How many different “stories” can you identify in this poem? Discuss how these stories all connect with one another.
- 3) Have you ever known anyone who had dementia? Or do you know anyone presently who has dementia? What is it like for you to interact with this person? What are some of the challenges in your relationship with this person because of the dementia? What, if any, are some of the joys?

If you don’t know what dementia is (or Alzheimer’s disease) or what it might be like for someone to experience dementia, do some **research** online. Then put what you learned in conversation with the poem.

- 4) How does the reference to “confusing fall warblers” relate to the poem?
- 5) What do you think the speaker’s relationship with her father was like when she was growing up? What do you think the father’s relationship with his own father was like when he was growing up?
- 6) How does the speaker complicate the relationship between reality and imagination?
- 7) Why do you think the father doesn’t say a word during the commercial about Alzheimer’s?
- 8) What do you think about the ending of the poem?

Creative Exercise:

Think about a time when you felt your sense of self change or even disappear. Or a time when you felt as if someone else’s identity was changing or disappearing. Then spend seven minutes writing about this change without picking up your pen or pencil. After you’ve finished your free-write, see if you can shape what you’ve written into a poem that tells the story of this change through concrete details and action verbs.

“The Life I Live,” p. 65

- 1) Read “The Life I Live” and identify as many themes and/or tensions as you can. Try to come up with at least eight.
- 2) How many different “stories” can you identify in this poem? Discuss how these stories all connect with one another.
- 3) What is the relationship in this poem between imagination and reality? How are they in conversation with each other?
- 4) If you don’t know who George the Hawaiian tree snail was, **research** him online. Do you know of other species that have gone extinct during your lifetime? What feelings come up for you when you think about an entire species going extinct?
- 5) What is this poem saying about the act of naming? Can you think of situations or behaviors in your life that needed to be named (in the sense of focusing attention on)?
- 6) How do you understand the ending of the poem – is this a positive/hopeful ending to the poem or a depressing ending? You might think about the ways that the speaker has referred to or described the divine in other poems.

Creative Exercises:

- 1) Pick an age for yourself far into the future and think about what you might be like at that age, where you might be living, how you might spend your days, etc. Spend seven minutes writing as much and as fast as you can about yourself at this future age. Don’t edit as you write and try not to stop at all until the time is up. Then re-read what you wrote. Did you learn anything new about yourself by doing this exercise?
- 2) Have you ever felt like your own life was split in two directions? If so, spend a few minutes writing about these two directions. Don’t edit as you write and try not to stop at all until the time is up. Then re-read what you wrote. Did you learn anything new about yourself by doing this exercise?
- 3) Write a poem (or do a free-write) using the information you learned about George the Hawaiian tree snail. Or pick another species of plant or animal that has gone extinct or is on the verge of extinction and write about that.

SECTION V

“I Love,” p. 71

- 1) Read “I Love” and identify as many themes and/or tensions as you can. Try to come up with at least five.
- 2) How do the themes and tensions of this poem relate to the poems from the rest of the book? Pick 2-3 poems from other sections of the book and discuss the way this poem is connected to these other poems.
- 3) How would you characterize the tone of this poem? And how does this poem make you feel?
- 4) Why do you think the poet chose to end the book with this poem? And what do you think is the significance of the last line of this poem?

Creative Exercise:

Nearly every line in this poem begins with the words “I love.” Do a free-write in which you begin every sentence with these same words. Write for about seven minutes. Don’t edit as you write and try not to stop at all until the time is up. Then re-read what you wrote. Did you learn anything new about yourself by doing this exercise?

CONCLUDING QUESTIONS

Concluding Questions about *Water Lessons*:

- 1) What central themes and tensions do you see in *Water Lessons* as a whole?
- 2) To say something is at stake in a work of literature means that the central protagonist or speaker stands to lose something that is valuable to them. What do you think is at stake for the speaker in *Water Lessons*?
- 3) How do the poems articulate a concern with a sense of self, particularly in terms of its fluidity or absence?
- 4) *Water Lessons* includes multiple poems about several different themes. For example, there are multiple poems about the father's dementia, the mother's alcoholism, and about race and racism. What is the effect of this choice?
- 5) What claims might *Water Lessons* be making about the relationship between imagination and religious belief or about the relationship between imagination and reality (what we think of as reality)? In which poems do such claims seem most prominent?
- 6) Did you notice any repetition of images or words in the book? How does this repetition contribute to the book as a whole?
- 7) Most of the poems in *Water Lessons* are written in couplets (two-lined stanzas). What is the effect of this form for the collection? Why might the writer have selected this form?
- 8) How do the poems seem to be ordered in the collection? What kind of narrative arc might be present because of this arrangement? What seems to be the purpose or unifying feature of each section?
- 9) The book is called *Water Lessons*. What lessons, if any, do you think the speaker has learned by the end of the book?
- 10) Make a list of four or five discussion questions that you would ask if you were teaching this book and that haven't been covered yet in your classroom discussions.

Creative Exercises:

- 1) Pretend you are going to interview the author of *Water Lessons* about her book. Come up with ten questions you would want to ask her in the interview. These can be questions that you personally want to know the answer to or questions that you think it would be helpful to ask for the overall flow of your interview.
- 2) Review the central themes or tensions in the book. Pick one that might relate to your own life and do a seven-minute free-write about this experience.