

Why Read Poetry (at a time like this)

Carol Jago, author of *The Book in Question: Why and How Reading Is in Crisis*
cjago@caroljago.com

So many things that we have always taken for granted are suddenly in question. Who could have imagined that school would be canceled? How is it conceivable that we are all working from home? What will tomorrow bring?

Much of what we have grown used to doing is different today.

Here is a lesson that invites students to reflect upon the changes they are experiencing. Ask your students to make two lists — one with all the things they used to do in school, on the playing fields, with friends; another with the things they do now instead. Suggest that each list include at least ten things.

Then have students read Quincy Troupe’s poem “Flying Kites.” In this two-stanza poem Troupe compares flying kites as a child with flying words as an adult, contrasting what he used to do with what he does today.

Flying Kites

by Quincy Troupe

we used to fly rainbow kites
across skull-caps of hours
holes on blue wings
of the canvas of sinking suns
running winged eyes locked to wind
we'd unwind the kite string up & away
then run them down blue tapestry
up the sky again, then down
until a sinking sun rolled
down into a swallowing sky

today, we fly words as kites
across pages of winds, through skies
as poems we shape from holy, bloody
adjectives & nouns
we loop into sound circles, ringing

like eclipse, the sun's tongue

Using Quincy Troupe's poem as a mentor text, ask students to use ideas from the two lists to write a poem of their own. No need to use all the ideas generated, only the ones that stirred up the most vivid images.

Here's a template to help students get started:

We used to _____

Today we _____

Once students finish writing, remind them to give the poem a title. If the platform you are employing for online learning permits it, have students share what they have written with one another.

I believe this kind of writing can help students reflect upon how their lives and the world around them is changing. The lesson is an invitation to pause and take stock of where they have been and where they are now. We are all traveling uncharted waters.

For more poems by Quincy Troupe

The Poetry Foundation <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/quincy-troupe>

Quincy Troupe's website <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/quincy-tro>

Weather

By Claudia Rankine

On a scrap of paper in the archive is written
I have forgotten my umbrella. Turns out
in a pandemic everyone, not just the philosopher,
is without. We scramble in the drought of information
held back by inside traders. Drop by drop. Face
covering? No, yes. Social distancing? Six feet
under for underlying conditions. Black.
Just us and the blues kneeling on a neck
with the full weight of a man in blue.
Eight minutes and forty-six seconds.
In extremis, *I can't breathe* gives way
to asphyxiation, to giving up this world,
and then *mama*, called to, a call
to protest, fire, glass, say their names, say
their names, *white silence equals violence*,
the violence of again, a militarized police
force teargassing, bullets ricochet, and civil
unrest taking it, burning it down. Whatever
contracts keep us social compel us now
to disorder the disorder. Peace. We're out
to repair the future. There's an umbrella
by the door, not for yesterday but for the weather
that's here. I say weather but I mean
a form of governing that deals out death
and names it living. I say weather but I mean
a November that won't be held off. This time
nothing, no one forgotten. We are here for the storm
that's storming because what's taken matters.

Say Thank You Say I'm Sorry

By Jericho Brown

I don't know whose side you're on,
But I am here for the people
Who work in grocery stores that glow in the morning
And close down for deep cleaning at night
Right up the street and in cities I mispronounce,
In towns too tiny for my big black
Car to quit, and in every wide corner
Of Kansas where going to school means
At least one field trip
To a slaughterhouse. I want so little: another leather bound
Book, a gimlet with a lavender gin, bread
So good when I taste it I can tell you
How it's made. I'd like us to rethink
What it is to be a nation. I'm in a mood about America
Today. I have PTSD
About the Lord. God save the people who work
In grocery stores. They know a bit of glamour
Is a lot of glamour. They know how much
It costs for the eldest of us to eat. Save
My loves and not my sentences. Before I see them,
I draw a mole near my left dimple,
Add flair to the smile they can't see

Behind my mask. I grin or lie or maybe
I wear the mouth of a beast. I eat wild animals
While some of us grow up knowing
What gnocchi is. The people who work at the grocery don't care.
They say, *Thank you*. They say, *Sorry*,
We don't sell motor oil anymore with a grief so thick
You could touch it. Go on. Touch it.
It is early. It is late. They have washed their hands.
They have washed their hands for you.
And they take the bus home.