



Calaveras and Conjuring with Words : Poems and Art Activity for Dia de los Muertos



Background

The altar or **ofrenda** tradition of Dia de los Muertos builds a bridge for the dead to travel between this world and the next. Family and friends place food, drink, objects, photographs, and personal items of the deceased on the altar to entice them to return. The powerful smell of marigolds makes a kind of aromatic trail leading the departed back. This tradition is meant to be welcoming and fun, not frightening. It is done with love, respect and sometimes humor.

Poem

What the altar does with physical items, we can do with words. We are calling these **conjuring** poems, because the idea is to create such a strong sense of the person through the details in the poem, that they in a sense, come back. The magic of the words, the details of speech, physical description and thought, bring these characters to life.

Definition of *conjure*

1 : to charge or entreat earnestly or solemnly

2 a : to summon by or as if by invocation or incantation **b** (1) : to affect or effect by or as if by magic (2) : **IMAGINE, CONTRIVE** -- often used with *up* <we *conjure* up our own metaphors for our own needs -- R. J. Kaufmann> (3) : to bring to mind <words that *conjure* pleasant images> -- often used with *up* <*conjure* up memories>

Worksheet for Conjure poem;

- Select the person who has died to whom you want to address your poem
- Write down a smell or scent you associate with this person
- Name a food or drink or taste of something they loved to eat or drink
- Write down a sound you associate with them. This can be music or the sound of them hammering or sweeping or chopping in the kitchen, a car horn, a whistle, a laugh, a cough, anything
- Remember a favorite article of clothing, a sweater, a pair of shoes they always wore/ Write those down.
- Was there a favorite saying they had? Something you associate with them, a nick name, a way of teasing? How would they greet you?
- What would you say to them if they came back? What might they say to you?
- What activity might you do together? Who else, if anyone, would join you?

Starting to write:

- You might think of this as an informal letter to this person. Address them by name for eg. Tio Manuel. Or a nickname or term of endearment like Grammy
- Some possible starts are “When you come back....” or a direct appeal, “Come back...”
- The memories and details from their lives are what you are offering as the lure to bring them back. Let them know what will happen if they return.

Sample Poems

1

For you, Grammy, I put your false teeth in a glass of water
next to the jewelry box with the dancing ballerina on top,
and inside, those green glass earrings that I bought you at Uncle Tony’s church rummage
sale,
and which you wore on Christmas.
Underneath, I put our aprons, the matching ones with red rick rack trimmed pockets,
and all my Barbie doll dresses you sewed from Dad’s ties.
I sprinkled a little of that pink face powder you used
and added some vanilla and molasses.
I set out African violets, and dahlias big as lions’ heads, and Christmas wreaths made of
coat hangars and Kleenex.
For dinner we’ll have beef stew with celery and just a little flour to thicken the sauce.
Can you see them, Grammy?
The candles look pretty behind the orange carrot Jell-O molds.
And if you come,
I promise I’ll sit up straight,
just like you always told me to.

2

Aaliyah,
I don't know much about you
I'm not even sure how to spell your name
But I like your music.
You died in a plane crash- what was that like?
If you come back will you wear a short tight shirt or
that bra made of silver chains?
What song will you sing? *I miss you.*
Do you
miss anyone?
I don't know what perfume you wear but
when you come back
will you smell like heaven

3

Hey, Grumpy
If you come back will you put on that guy cologne, the one with the fresh smell
like cool water.
We'll leave out a pizza for you
Plain, just with pepperoni and cheese
and a cold 40 bottle of Mickies.
You were so sensitive ... we'll talk about your girlfriend Tania.
Do you still want to go back with her?
She's somewhere,
who knows where.
I'll try not to get you mad- the way you do when someone insults your friends.
When you see us Julio, will you go "OH" in that breathy voice
And say hello with the accent on the O?
You can wear your Dallas Cowboys' jersey(I forgot the number)?
And your dark baggy jeans
and the blue handkerchief hanging out of the pocket
and your plain super white super clean Nikes.
You are my good friend, Julio
I can talk to you like no one else.
Come back Julio,
you can imitate Mr Capone
and goof around
and even though I know your jokes are stupid.
You can make me laugh.

4

Angel, when you come back
I bet you'll come back on your black cruiser
moving slowly
with a lit sweet swisher cigar in your mouth
you'll be wearing a black buttoned up shirt with a collar
But only buttoned up half way
and baggy jeans
and your I pod will be playing Tupac loud enough so everyone can hear-
When you come back, Angel
me you and Hans will skate together out at UCSB
and maybe the skate park.
We'll just ride around
you'll say "Whas up den?"
and I'll tell you
we are good friends
like I meant to do
I guess I did
when you were here.

Dia de los Muertos Art Activity: Calavera with Niche



Materials:

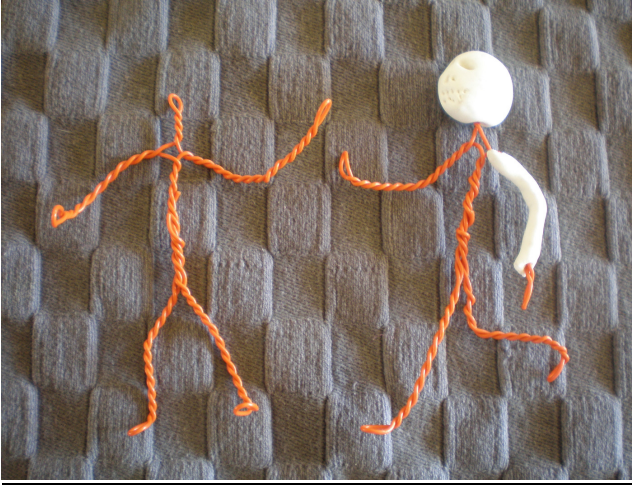
- Crayola's "Model Magic" white modeling compound (8oz. package is enough for about 8 students)
- "Twisteez" plastic coated wire (one 30" strand per calavera)
- Fine point black Sharpies
- Assorted color Sharpies
- Gift box, approximately 4"x 5"x 1" (one per student)
- Aluminum tooling foil, 36 gauge (each niche requires a 6" x 12" piece of foil)
- Dull pencils for drawing designs in the foil
- Assorted colored paper for Conjuring Poem backdrop inside niche
- Additional chipboard for the half circle top of niche
- Tacky glue
- Black masking tape
- Glitter glue (optional)

Teacher Prep:

- Split apart each corner of the top of gift box so that it can lay flat.
- Remove the top and bottom flap.
- Cut the box top in half lengthwise; the two pieces will become the niche doors, with the remaining side flaps serving as hinges.
- Cut the foil into 3 pieces for each niche: one that will cover both sides of the half circle for the top of the niche, and two that will cover both sides of each door.
- Cut half circles from chipboard to fit the top of the niche.
- Cut the colored paper to fit inside the bottom of the box.
- Assemble a variety of Dia de los Muertos imagery for the students to study and use as inspiration for their figures.

Instructions:

Make the Armature



- Starting at the center point of a Twisteez wire, form a small loop by twisting the wire together a few times. This is the skull/neck area of the armature.
- Taking one of the strands of wire, form a loop approximately 2-1/2" long, and twist it together until you reach the base of the neck area. This is one of the arms.
- Do the same to the remaining strand to form the second arm.
- Twist the two strands together to form the torso. It should reach no longer than the length of one of the arms.
- Double up one of the strands into a loop to twist into a leg. Make sure the leg is not so long that the armature, once it is bearing a skull on top, won't fit into the box.
- Do the same with the remaining strand to form the second leg.
- Bend the wire to place the armature in its character's pose.

Cover the Armature

- Using a ball of Model magic roughly 1" in diameter, pinch the bottom portion of the ball to help form the jawbone area of the skull. By pressing gently in the temple area of the skull, cheekbones can be defined.
- Using a pencil, poke large eye sockets into the skull.
- The nose and teeth can either be formed in the surface of the skull with the pencil, or drawn in with the black Sharpie pen later.
- Using small, rolled pieces of Model Magic, cover the remainder of the armature.
- Use additional Model Magic to make the character's attribute or other objects. They can either be stuck onto the figure right away or glued on after they have been decorated.
- Allow the figure to dry for 24 hours.

Decorate the Figure



- Using the black fine point Sharpies, draw decorative lines and shapes onto the figure to accentuate the eye sockets, nose, teeth, bones, and joints.
- Do the same to the character's attribute/accompanying object(s).
- Add color accents with the assorted color sharpies.

Make the Niche



- Create designs for the inside of the niche doors, the outside of the niche doors, and the top of the niche.
- Place the foil on top of a section of newspaper or magazine in order to provide a bit of cushioning underneath. Using a dull pencil, draw the designs into the foil.
- Using tacky glue, affix the foil pieces to each of the doors and the half circle top.
- Glue the foil doors and half circle top to the box. Allow to dry.
- Apply strips of black masking tape on top of the edges of the box where the doors and half circle have been glued for extra security and coverage.

- Have students write their Conjuring Poem on a piece of colored paper. Glue the poem into the bottom of the niche.
- Glue the calavera and its attribute/object(s) into the niche.
- Add details with glitter glue if desired.
- ENJOY!

