

Poetry Remake Competition
List of Poems and Learning and Teaching Materials for
Junior Secondary Division

His t-shirts**Tammy Ho**

Medium-sized t-shirts on his dark body.
 He's totally Chinese - more so than me.
 But in periods when he's building bridges,
 fixing window panes or drilling roads,
 5 I think he's from Africa.
 Yellow skin is black in the sun.
 Who said colours are God-given?

Medium-sized t-shirts he has aplenty.
 Elated, in countries foreign, we do not forget
 10 at home he's suppressing his worried lips.
 He wants nothing from us, but
 we like the idea of giving. And so he's
 wearing t-shirts from London, Thailand,
 Auckland, Japan, Finland, India,
 15 Malaysia, Poland, Korea...
 'Where are you from, father?' We are
 teasers. Names of places bold
 in English on his chest. He doesn't know.
 'China,' he answers. We laugh.
 20 We laugh. Bad daughters.

Medium-sized t-shirts on top of Large
 -sized ones in his drawers.
 He once stood huge
 in front of a snack bar,
 25 buying us coca-colas,
 and we cheered.

Suggested Questions and Answers

1. What is this poem about?

The family life of a father and his children

2. Who is the speaker in this poem?

One of the father's daughters

3. Describe the relationship between the speaker and her father. Support your answer with evidence from the poem.

The poem depicts the bond between the speaker and her father through the narration of their everyday lives. While the love from the working class father to the speaker is unconditional (e.g. He wants nothing from us in line 11), the speaker shows her love by buying him t-shirts as souvenirs from her trips. The warm and affectionate way she and her sisters tease their father also indicates their close relationship.

4. What changes has the speaker observed in his father over time?

The speaker has observed that her father has aged and shrunk over time. He “once stood huge” and used to wear large-sized t-shirts but now he is shrinking and needs to wear medium-sized t-shirts as he is getting old.

5. Does the poem have any important symbol? What meaning does it bring to the poem?

- “Medium-sized t-shirts”, which echoes with the title “His T-shirts”, stands out in the poem as it is repeated at the beginning of each stanza.
- The word “medium-sized” is used to describe the father’s body size while “t-shirts” are the gifts from his daughters. “Medium sized t-shirts” symbolises the love and bond between the father and the daughters and the aging of the loving and well-loved father.

6. What is the theme of the poem?

Family love / the idea of giving

Lamma Island Tofu-fa

Kate Rogers

On the broken trail to Mot tat
a field of white ginger lilies
flags us down.
We shrug off our packs.
5 Huddled among ruins to our left,
a stone house
red clay roof sloping,
doorway gaping
like an old man sleeping.
10 A wriggly-tin shed
shades wooden tubs of tofu.
We sit at a plank table.
A tiny woman
with a toothless smile,
15 trembling, blue-veined hands,
carries a tray. Tofu-fa
is heaped like soft snow
in turquoise plastic bowls.
I love the tofu's smooth surface
20 but crave the sight of golden sugar
pocking its face,
tofu puddled in ginger syrup –
its sharp scent,
clearing my nostrils
25 with the first spoonful.
Dusk creeps under our table
grey as the old woman's dog.
The old woman dozes
on her low stool beside the shed,
30 bathed in the milk of the moon.

“Lamma Island Tofu-fa” first appeared in the *American Literary Journal*, *World Literature Today*, Spring 2019 issue.

Suggested Questions and Answers

1. What is the setting of the poem?

The poem is set in Mot tat on Lamma Island near dusk time.

2. Who are “us” and “we” in lines 3-4? What do you think they are doing in Mot tat at the beginning of the poem?

- The speaker and his friends
- They may be hiking as they carry backpacks.

3. Identify three comparisons from the poem to complete the following sentences:

- The stone house with a “sloping” red clay roof and a “gaping” doorway is compared to a “sleeping old man” (lines 6-9) because
 - they are both old;
 - the “sloping” roof resembles the posture of the old man with his body leaning forward when dozing off; and
 - the “gaping” doorway is like the sleeping old man with his toothless mouth wide open.
- Tofu-fa is compared to “soft snow” (lines 16-17) because they both melt easily and are white, tender and smooth.
- The dusk that “creeps” in is compared to the old woman’s dog (lines 26-27) because they are both grey and perhaps moving slowly and quietly.
- Moonlight is compared to “milk” (line 30) because they are both soft, white and pale.

4. In lines 16-25, rich imagery is used in the description of tofu-fa.

(a) Identify expressions that appeal to the following senses and complete the table below:

Sense	Examples
sight	“turquoise plastic bowls” (line 18) “golden sugar” (line 20) “tofu puddled in ginger syrup” (line 22)
hearing	nil
smell	“sharp scent” (line 23)
touch	“heaped like soft snow” (line 17) “smooth surface” (line 19) “pocking its face” (line 21)
taste	“ginger syrup” (line 22) “clearing my nostrils with the first spoonful” (lines 24-25)

- (b) Which sense has not been used in the description of tofu-fa? Enrich the poem with a line that appeals to this missing sense.

Auditory/Sound imagery that appeals to the sense of hearing has not been used in the description of tofu-fa. The poem could be enriched with the following line:

Slurp! The silky jelly melts in my mouth.

5. Comment on the special use of language in lines 21-22. What effects does it create? “Pock” and “puddle” are commonly used as nouns but are turned into verb forms as “pocking” and “puddled” in the poem. This special use of language makes the description of tofu-fa animated.

6. Describe the mood in lines 26-30. How is the mood created?

The mood is dreamlike, calm and tranquil. This is created by the rhythm and imagery of the lines:

- The use of long vowels in words such as “creeps”, “dozes”, “stool”, “bathed” and “moon” slows down the poem, creating a mood of serenity.
- The use of action words such as “creeping” and “dozes” imparts a sense of stillness and inactivity to the scene. “Dusk” is personified with the use of the word “creeping”, which suggests the motion is slow, light and quiet.
- The pale moonlight, which is likened to “milk” in line 30, adds a blurry and hazy touch to the scene, creating a dreamlike quality.

7. If you could break this poem into different stanzas, how would you break the lines apart? Mark with // places you would like to start a new stanza and explain why.

any reasonable answers

Thinking of Work

James Shea

A brief storm
blew the earth clean.

There was much
to do: sun to put up,
5 clouds to put out,
blue to install,
limbs to remove,
grass to implant.

(The grass failed.
10 We ordered new grass.)

A limb cracked
in half in the short storm,
short with its feeling.

We saw its innards,
15 all the hollow places.

Something flew out of
the window and then
the window flew out of the window.

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Suggested Questions and Answers

1. What is the poem about?

The poem is about what happened and what has to be done after a storm.

2. In Stanza 1, the storm is described as “brief”. How do the length of the lines and word choice bring out the brevity of the storm?

The poem is mainly composed of short lines and words, notably monosyllabic words, which echo with the brevity of the storm.

3. How does the speaker emphasise that there was “much to do” after the storm?

The use of parallel structures, such as “sun to put up” and “clouds to put out”, in close succession creates a sense of repetition, tediousness and urgency, which helps elaborate the idea that there is a list of follow-up work to do.

4. What is the follow-up work after the storm likened to? Answer with close reference to the nouns and verbs/action words used in the poem.

The follow-up work is likened to a surgery or mechanical repair. While the nouns “limbs” and “innards” may refer to the parts and insides of a body/machine, the verbs “install”, “remove”, “implant” and “failed” are associated with the failure of an organ/machine or the work involved in a surgery/repair.

5. Comment on the repeated use of certain words in the poem. What effect does it achieve?

- Some words are used repeatedly in the poem (e.g. “limbs in lines 7 &11, “short” in lines 12 &13, “windows” in lines 17-18). The repeated words often carry multiple meanings that change as the poem progresses. For example:
 - “limbs” may refer to the limbs of a person, a machine or a tree;
 - “short” may vary in meaning from lasting a brief time to being little in length/height and not having enough of something;
 - “window” varies from the actual window pane and frame to an opening/empty space on the wall, and extends to the meaning of the idiomatic expression “flying out of window”, which means disappearing completely.
- Through the repeated use of words with multiple meanings, the poet creates ambiguity and leaves room for readers’ free interpretation. It also helps to achieve a playful tone, a light-hearted mood and a comical effect.

fence

Eddie Tay

skyscrapers
all eyes looking at the centre

henry aspires to havard business
and throws away his harmonica

5 jenny is driving a car
into her global spider networked future

jonah unfurls like a creased carpet
on the eighth floor to watch voodoo tv

10 someone is working on her tablet cv
on winning beans and influencing people

dorcas must pass her abrsn
she bangs on her piano or else her mother

skyscrapers, fence
all eyes looking

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Suggested Questions and Answers

1. What do you think “skyscrapers” and “fence” symbolise in the poem?
 - “Skyscrapers” may symbolise people’s high ambitions, goals, dreams and aspirations in life.
 - “Fence” may refer to some barriers/obstacles or boundaries/limits to live with.
2. In Stanza 2,
 - (a) identify the alliteration used
henry, havard, his, harmonica
 - (b) work out what the “harmonica” in line 4 symbolises
interest/hobby
3. Identify two comparisons in Stanzas 3 and 4.
 - “Future” is compared to a “highway” as both are pathways leading to a destination.
 - How Jonah unwinds herself is compared to the smoothing of a creased carpet as both were folded.
4. In Stanza 5,
 - (a) explain why the name of the person is not provided
The name is not provided possibly because the character is too typical in the city and many people are doing the same thing every day.
 - (b) work out what “winning beans” may mean
It may mean making money.
5. How would Dorcas’ mother react if Dorcas failed to pass her piano exam? Complete the following sentence.
Her mother would be angry/upset/disappointed // blame her for not trying hard enough.
6. Discuss the use of repetition in the last stanza of the poem. What effect does it achieve?
 - “Skyscrapers” and “all eyes looking” are repeated in the last stanza to echo the opening. The closure may suggest a sense of entrapment, with the middle stanzas about different people’s stories being enveloped, as encompassed by a fence.
 - The title word “fence” is repeated in the last stanza. It suggests that while people are living in or surrounded by skyscrapers with their eyes focusing on

high aims and achievements, there are also barriers that come in between.

7. What is special about the use of punctuation marks and capitalisation in the poem?
 - There is a general lack of punctuation marks in the poem. The only punctuation mark used is the comma between the “skyscrapers” and “fence” in line 13. It separates the “skyscrapers” with the “fence”, which signifies the barrier to someone’s dream.
 - All words, including the names of the characters, are in lower case. The use of lowercase letters for names is special, suggesting that the names mentioned are not proper nouns but may refer to anyone in the world.

8. Do you think the “fence” in the poem is surmountable? Does the poem present an optimistic or pessimistic outlook on life?
 - I think the fence in the poem is surmountable as a fence is usually not very high and comes with holes. In the poem, people can still see the skyscrapers, which symbolise their dreams and goals, through the fence.
 - I think the poem largely presents an optimistic view on life. Most of the characters have high aspirations for the future and they work hard in pursuit of success.

Shanghai Street

Jennifer Wong

It is the missing block four of a development,
the way we avoid going outdoors
one summer evening of ghost festival.

We suspect foreigners may be confused
5 by shop signs that read
'Celestial Pleasures' or
'Eternal Living' nestled between
tuck-shops and stationers
in the middle of Shanghai Street.
10 I heard that folks went there
for quality timber and craftsmanship.

When I was a kid I used to think
they were toy shops - all those
paper houses, paper dolls,
15 paper shirts and even mobile phones.
I didn't know until the day I saw
Grandmother burned them after purchase.

I didn't know what to do
with the packet I received:
20 a coin, a sweet, and tissue paper.
A riddle.
How strange it feels,
things we don't talk about.

Suggested Questions and Answers

1. What is the setting of the poem?

The poem is set in Shanghai Street in one evening near the ghost festival.

2. In Stanza 1, why is the block four missing?

As “four” and “death” sound similar in Cantonese, the number “four” is regarded as inauspicious in Hong Kong. It is not uncommon to leave out this unlucky number for blocks and floors of buildings in Hong Kong.

3. What do the “folks” want to buy in lines 10-11?

Coffins/caskets

4. In Stanza 2, why may foreigners be confused?

Without knowledge of the Chinese culture, foreigners may have no clue about the types of shops by looking at the signs which read “Celestial Pleasures” or “Eternal Living”. The names of the shops suggest happiness but the shops actually sell death related items (e.g. coffins).

5. Comment on the tone and voice of the speaker in the poem.

The speaker adopts the first-person point of view and recalls her memory about the paper effigies shops as a kid. The repeated use of “I didn’t know” in lines 16 and 18 emphasises the speaker’s ignorance of and bewilderment at the Chinese rituals and culture when she was young. She used to think that the paper effigies were toys but in fact, they were offerings to the dead.

6. What does the speaker mean by “A riddle” in line 21?

The speaker describes the packet she received at the funeral as a riddle because she was puzzled at what she should do with the coin, sweet and tissue paper in the packet, and she would never ask her family as death is considered a taboo subject in Chinese society.