

## Task for *Inside My Mother*

### 'Key'

'Key' is the first of 19 poems in the final section of this collection. It is about family, kin and Country, explored through the illness of a grandmother. It is a delicate and sensitive portrait of loss, sorrow, illness and – above all – love.

Before exploring the poem, students should discuss:

- the role of grandparents in our lives
- which cultures revere the importance of grandparents in the family structure
- the impact of grandparents on an individual's heritage and identity

Students may also consider the various meanings and connotations of the word 'key':

- a tool to unlock a door, a gate that is the conduit to somewhere else
- a tool to unlock a box, crate or suitcase that reveals a range of (possibly unknown) items – a discovery or re-discovery
- an answer, clue, explanation or lead, central and important to understanding – a vital, salient feature

The word 'key' appears twice in the poem, and only towards the end – 'keyless door' and 'no key hole' – and yet it is the title.

Could the link here be that the grandmother is as much the key – significant and vital – to the girl's identity and sense of self as the actual implement or tool?

### Exploring the poem

Some language features for students to respond to:

- Note the use of the present tense verbs: 'stands', 'stares', 'squints', 'breathes', 'stinks', 'stumble', 'scuffle', 'smells', 'hears', 'recognises', 'invites', 'heralds', 'stays', 'waits', 'reaches', 'cheers', 'glance'. Why do you think the poet chose this tense?
- How do the third-person narration and present tense verbs contribute to the cinematic quality?
- Use a thesaurus to find synonyms for 'squints', 'stinks', 'stumbles' and 'scuffle'. List three to four synonyms for each verb. Choose two of the four verbs and write a paragraph on how Eckermann has crafted her poem with specific verbs, and how the synonyms fall short of capturing the ideas and mood fostered by her choices.

The tender and respectful language choices shape the way we see the girl's grandmother.

- Choose three examples that evoke this tender, respectful attitude.

- Explore the beautiful simile that compares the precious time the girl and her grandmother have left before the latter dies: ‘their time is sparse like a dying tree’. Explain how this simile works.

The narrative is structured in eleven even stanzas. Eckermann’s skill and training as a visual artist are at work here. It is almost as if each stanza is a separate shot in a short film.

In your own words, explain what this stanza is exploring:

sometimes she recognises the fragrance  
of storms approaching and stands transfixed  
watching water trickle past her toes

- Why does the poet reinforce that the door is ‘keyless’?
- In what ways do you think the girl and the grandmother are contrasted?
- Despite this contrast, they are ‘kindred spirits’. How effective is the rest of the stanza in representing their relationship?
- What do you think Eckermann is sharing with her reader in these final lines?

there is no key hole to the future  
and no vision to the past

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