



# CALAVERAS AND CONJURING WITH WORDS

## AKNOWLEDGMENT

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## 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*:

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 (e.g., 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.



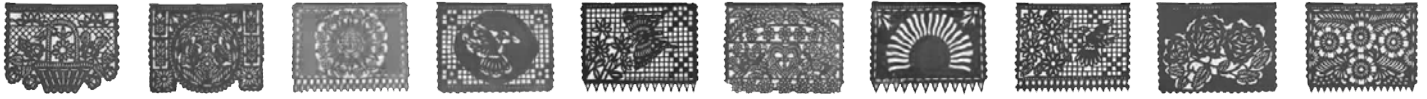
And if you come,  
I promise I'll sit up straight,  
just like you always told me to.

## 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 iPod 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.