

Name: _____ Class: _____

I Ask My Mother to Sing

By Li-Young Lee
1986

Li-Young Lee is an American poet who was born in Indonesia to Chinese parents. His family eventually settled in the United States after fleeing anti-Chinese attitudes. Lee's poetry is popular for its simplistic and passionate style. In this poem, Lee explores the experiences of his family, as his parents were exiled from their home in China before he was born. Lee asks his mother and grandmother to sing about China. As you read, take notes on the mood and how it changes through the poem.

- [1] She begins, and my grandmother joins her.
Mother and daughter sing like young girls.
If my father were alive, he would play
his accordion and sway like a boat.
- [5] I've never been in Peking,¹ or the Summer
Palace,²
nor stood on the great Stone Boat³ to watch
the rain begin on Kuen Ming Lake, the picnickers
running away in the grass.
- But I love to hear it sung;
[10] how the waterlilies fill with rain until
they overturn, spilling water into water,
then rock back, and fill with more.



["The Marble Boat"](#) by Nathan Laurell is licensed under CC BY-NC 2.0.

Both women have begun to cry.
But neither stops her song.

Li-Young Lee, "I Ask My Mother to Sing," from Rose. Copyright © 1986 by Li-Young Lee. Used with the permission of The Permissions Company, Inc., on behalf of BOA Editions, Ltd., www.boaeditions.org.

1. an older name for the city of Beijing, the capital of China
2. a vast palace in Beijing
3. a large boat holding a decorated building that looks like a small palace

Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: Which of the following identifies a theme of the poem? [RL.2]
 - A. Recounting one’s family history can be both pleasant and painful.
 - B. The past is best left alone.
 - C. It is important to know your family history.
 - D. It is impossible to move on without addressing the past.

2. PART B: Which detail from the text best supports the answer to Part A? [RL.1]
 - A. “If my father were alive, he would play / his accordion and sway like a boat.” (Lines 3-4)
 - B. “I’ve never been in Peking, or the Summer Palace” (Line 5)
 - C. “how the waterlilies fill with rain until / they overturn, spilling water into water” (Lines 10-11)
 - D. “Both women have begun to cry. / But neither stops her song.” (Lines 13-14)

3. PART A: How do lines 5-9 contribute to the development of the theme of the poem? [RL.5]
 - A. They prove how beautiful and exciting Beijing is.
 - B. They show that the speaker wishes he had experienced China.
 - C. They describe how impressive the Summer Palace is.
 - D. They show much the narrator misses Beijing.

4. PART B: Which detail from the text best supports the answer to Part A? [RL.1]
 - A. “I’ve never been in Peking, or the Summer Palace” (Line 5)
 - B. “the rain begin on Kuen Ming Lake” (Line 7)
 - C. “the picnickers / running away in the grass.” (Lines 7-8)
 - D. “But I love to hear it sung” (Line 9)

5. How does the mood change through the poem, and how does the poet’s word choice [RL.4] create this shift?
