

Classroom Connection: Guiding Questions for Writing *Calaveras*

While it is common in Mexico to write a literary *calavera* that pokes fun at a living person as if the person has died, *calaveras* can also be generally about death or a loved one who has died. These two exercises and guiding questions will help students in middle or high school experiment with writing *calaveras* in English by turning a story about one of Posada's illustrations, or a story about a friend or family member who has died, into a *calavera*.

1

Choose one of Posada's illustrations (you can find some of his images and links to other sites with images at <https://blogs.loc.gov/picturethis/2017/11/breathing-life-into-the-day-of-the-dead-the-calaveras-of-jos-guadalupe-posada>) and consider the following questions: Who are the characters? What are they doing? How are they interacting? What is distinctive about each? What do you think each backstory is? What are potential nicknames for the characters? What are some funny, interesting, or puzzling details in the scene that you did not notice at first? Does one character look more powerful or important than the others, and why? What message do you think Posada is trying to convey? Why are characters portrayed as skeletons?

Brainstorm a short, silly story about the scene; then write a short verse of four lines or more, with a simple rhyming scene based on this story. You do not have to retell the story in verse form; you can just use the story as inspiration. It might be helpful to make a list of rhyming words that you associate with the scene or story before you begin writing the verse.

2

Think of a friend, family member, or public person who has died. What were some activities they liked to do? What were some of their habits? What was their favorite food or drink? How did they usually dress and wear their hair? What are some specific things that you connect with this person (a musical instrument, plant, tool, or personal item, for example), and why? What are some phrases or words that they often said? How would you describe their personality and general attitude toward life? What is something that this person gave you or taught you? What are other features about this person that you admire? Think of a true, humorous story that summarizes what was special or unique about this person. Then write a verse that summarizes the story. You can write the verse in an open form, meaning that it does not follow a rhyming scheme or a particular pattern, or you can write a rhymed verse. Choose words that really resonate with your memories and feelings. If you like, you can write the verse as if it were going to be placed on an *ofrenda* in honor of the person, where it would be read by people who gather around the *ofrenda*, and may give some insight into the items, such as special food and drink, placed on the *ofrenda*.