

Dear Year 12s, Transition Week 6

This week we want you to look at one of your 20 named poems that you have to study from the poetry collection called Poems of the Decade.

Read the poem 'Chainsaw Versus the Pampas Grass' by Simon Armitage two or three times. Then answer the questions. Keep your written notes with you in a folder ready for the start of Year 12.

Mr Cornick and Ms Parker.

***Chainsaw versus the Pampas Grass***

It seemed an unlikely match. All winter unplugged,  
grinding its teeth in a plastic sleeve, the chainsaw swung  
nose-down from a hook in the darkroom  
under the hatch in the floor. When offered the can  
it knocked back a quarter-pint of engine oil  
and juices ran from its joints and threads,  
oozed across the guide-bar and the maker's name,  
into the dry links.

From the summerhouse, still holding one last gulp  
of last year's heat behind its double doors, and hung  
with the weightless wreckage of wasps and flies,  
mothballed in spider's wool . . .  
from there, I trailed the day-glo orange power line  
the length of the lawn and the garden path,  
fed it out like powder from a keg, then walked  
back to the socket and flicked the switch, then walked again  
and coupled the saw to the flex – clipped them together.  
Then dropped the safety catch and gunned the trigger.

No gearing up or getting to speed, just an instant rage,  
the rush of metal lashing out at air, connected to the mains.  
The chainsaw with its perfect disregard, its mood  
to tangle with cloth, or jewellery, or hair.  
The chainsaw with its bloody desire, its sweet tooth  
for the flesh of the face and the bones underneath,  
its grand plan to kick back against nail or knot  
and rear up into the brain.  
I let it flare, lifted it into the sun  
and felt the hundred beats per second drumming in its heart,  
and felt the drive-wheel gargle in its throat.

This was the sledgehammer taken to crack the nut.  
Probably all that was needed here was a good pull or shove  
or a pitchfork to lever it out at its base.  
Overkill. I touched the blur of the blade  
against the nearest tip of a reed – it didn't exist.  
I dabbed at a stalk that swooned, docked a couple of heads,  
dismissed the top third of its canes with a sideways sweep  
at shoulder height – this was a game.  
I lifted the fringe of undergrowth, carved at the trunk –  
plant-juice spat from the pipes and tubes  
and dust flew out as I ripped into pockets of dark, secret warmth.

To clear a space to work  
I raked whatever was severed or felled or torn  
towards the dead zone under the outhouse wall, to be fired.  
Then cut and raked, cut and raked, till what was left  
was a flat stump the size of a barrel lid  
that wouldn't be dug with a spade or prised from the earth.  
Wanting to finish things off I took up the saw  
and drove it vertically downwards into the upper roots,  
but the blade became choked with soil or fouled with weeds,  
or what was sliced or split somehow closed and mended behind,  
like cutting at water or air with a knife.  
I poured barbecue fluid into the patch  
and threw in a match – it flamed for a minute, smoked  
for a minute more, and went out. I left it at that.

In the weeks that came new shoots like asparagus tips  
sprang up from its nest and by June  
it was riding high in its saddle, wearing a new crown.  
Corn in Egypt. I looked on  
from the upstairs window like the midday moon.

Back below stairs on its hook the chainsaw seethed.  
I left it a year, to work back through its man-made dreams, to try to forget.  
The seamless urge to persist was as far as it got.

1. How does Armitage describe the chainsaw? Pick out what you think are the most interesting words or phrases. Explain how these words or phrases affect your response to the chainsaw.
2. With reference to these two pictures and the wording of the title, which of these two objects might win in a fight, in your opinion? Are you surprised by the ending of the poem?



3. How does Armitage describe the pampas grass? Again, select what you think are the most interesting words or phrases and explain their effect.
4. How does the narrator approach the removal of the pampas grass? How easy does he think it will be? Find evidence in quotations to support what you say.
5. At what point in the poem does it become clear that the pampas grass is not going to be so easily defeated?
6. Make a list of the oppositions in the poem.

| Pampas Grass | Chainsaw |
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7. How do you think that Simon Armitage has used the form of the poem (stanza pattern, length of lines etc) to support his ideas?

7. What do these oppositions suggest might be some of the underlying meanings of the poem? Do you think he is using symbolism? Is this a poem purely about gardening or can it be interpreted in any other ways?