Nikky Finney
“The Head over Heels”

The middle section of Finney’s book *Head off & Split* is comprised of Ms. Finney’s personal poetry. Each poem takes readers on a journey from her childhood to adulthood. Her evocative and carefully chosen words allow the reader to travel back in time to her earliest moments of self-awareness, sexual discovery and self-acceptance. Her first poem and last poem in this section: “Thunderbolt of Jove” and “Brown Girl Levitation: 1962-1989” should be studied together as careful readers will experience her coming of age along with her.

“Thunderbolt of Jove”: A Reading Guide

1. Considering the title, what could be inferred through the use of “thunderbolt?” Why Jove?
2. What descriptive words are used in the first three stanzas?
   a. What type of setting is created here?
3. How old do you assume the daughter to be?
   a. How is the mother and daughter described differently?
4. To what metaphorical "storm" (stanza 3) could author be referring?
   a. What are some “storms” you have experienced in your life? How did you react to them?
   b. What reaction does each character have and what does this suggest about them?
5. In stanza 6, (page 44) what is interesting in the word choice used?
   “The girl is willing to be turned into the roar of rock, the float of ash…
6. Which character experiences a transformation? Which character remains flat/stagnant? What does this suggest about them?
7. In stanza 8, (page 44) what is interesting about the speaker’s perception of the daughter? What word do you see being repeated (refer back to stanza 6).
8. From whose point of view does the final stanza seem to be written? What does this suggest about the mother?
9. What does the word choice of the final stanza infer about the girl’s future?
   a. Do you think the girl agrees? What textual evidence supports your assertion?


1. What is literally being described in the first stanza of the poem? What could the figurative meaning of this be?
   a. How does the character feel about what is happening?
2. What is unique about the list generated in stanza 2? Would any of these be effective in “grounding” the speaker?
3. Where is this “storm” that the speaker mentions? What connection(s) can you make to “Thunderbolt of Jove”?
4. How many years do you think have passed since “Thunderbolt of Jove”? What textual evidence suggests this?
   a. What could be the event that is “levitating” her?
   b. What types of events “levitate” people throughout adolescence?
5. Consider the line: “I could not grab my girl hat and run.” What does this suggest about the speaker of the poem?
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6. What literal vision does the speaker have in the final stanza? What figurative meaning could this have?
7. How is the message of the poem conveyed through the images presented in the poem?

Connections:

1. How has the speaker, presumably Finney, mentally or emotionally changed from “Thunderbolt of Jove” to “Brown Girl Levitation: 1962-1989”?
2. Both poems trace three generations of women: a grandmother, mother, and daughter; how is each presented differently? What cultural implications could be the cause for these personality differences?
3. Both poems are very visionary and the youngest character (the daughter in “Thunderbolt of Jove” and the speaker in “Brown Girl Levitation: 1962-1989”) is the character who changes as a result of her surroundings. What metaphorical visions could be represented in these two poems?
   a. How does what we see around us influence the choices we make? The way we feel?