The Gift & the Curse
by Ellen Chamberlain

DURATION: 1.5 hours
GRADE LEVEL: High School
WRITING LEVEL: Experienced
FOCUS: conflict, place, home
KEY TERMS: paradox
EXAMPLE TEXT: Thinking American by Hayan Charara

Check in | 15 minutes
What is a characteristic or talent you have that may be considered both a gift and a curse?
What makes it a gift? A curse?

Resource Building | 15 minutes
KEY TERM | PARADOX: a person, situation, or action having seemingly contradictory qualities or phases.
EXERCISE | Make a list of:

- 5 adjectives (descriptive words)
- 10 locations in the city you live (your home, the library, your favorite park, school, etc.)
- 3 destinations outside of the United States (cities, countries, attractions or special sites, etc.)
- 5 types of people you’d meet on a bus

Close Reading | 20 minutes
Thinking American by Hayan Charara

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER:
- Has the speaker abandoned the city or saved himself? How do you know this?
- If Detroit represents any other city, where is there to go?
- After reading the poem, do you want to stay or go? Why?

Writing Prompt | 20 minutes
Write a love / hate poem to a city you know well. Include lines that explore why you will always stay or immediately go.
OR Write about the topic of your choosing but in metaphor. Try not to reveal your subject until the final line or stanza.

Share Out | 15 minutes
Thinking American by Hayan Charara

—For Dioniso D. Martínez

Take Detroit, where boys are manufactured into men, where you learn to think in American. You speak to no one unless someone speaks to you. Everyone is suspect: baldheaded carriers from the post office; old Polish ladies who swear to Jesus, Joseph, and Mary; your brother, especially your brother, waiting in a long line for work. There’s always a flip side. No matter what happens, tomorrow is a day away, or a gin bottle if you can’t sleep, and if you stopped drinking, a pack of cigarettes. After that, you’re on your own, you pack up and leave. You still call the city beside the strait home. Make no mistake, it’s miserable. After all, you bought a one-way Greyhound ticket, cursed each and every pothole on the road out. But that’s where you stood before a mirror in the dark, where you were too tired to complain. You never go back. Things could be worse. Maybe. Detroit is a shithole, it’s where you were pulled from the womb into the streets. Listen, when I say Detroit, I mean any place. By thinking American, I mean made.

Thinking American by Hayan Charara, Poetry Foundation