

Where I'm From

George Ella Lyon

I am from clothespins,
from Clorox and carbon-tetrachloride.
I am from the dirt under the back porch.
(Black, glistening,
it tasted like beets.)
I am from the forsythia bush
the Dutch elm
whose long-gone limbs I remember
as if they were my own.

I'm from fudge and eyeglasses,
from Imogene and Alafair.
I'm from the know-it-alls
and the pass-it-ons,
from Perk up! and Pipe down!
I'm from He restoreth my soul
with a cottonball lamb
and ten verses I can say myself.

I'm from Artemus and Billie's Branch,
fried corn and strong coffee.
From the finger my grandfather lost
to the auger,
the eye my father shut to keep his sight.

Under my bed was a dress box
spilling old pictures,
a sift of lost faces
to drift beneath my dreams.
I am from those moments--
snapped before I budded --
leaf-fall from the family tree.

A note from the author:

“Where I'm From” grew out of my response to a poem from **Stories I Ain't Told Nobody Yet** (Orchard Books, 1989; Theater Communications Group, 1991) by my friend, Tennessee writer Jo Carson. All of the People Pieces, as Jo calls them, are based on things folks actually said, and number 22 begins, “I want to know when you get to be from a place.” Jo's speaker, one of those people “that doesn't have roots like trees,” tells us “I am from Interstate 40” and “I am from the work my father did.”

In the summer of 1993, I decided to see what would happen if I made my own where-I'm-from lists, which I did, in a black and white speckled composition book. I edited them into a poem — not my usual way of working — but even when that was done I kept on making the lists. The process was too rich and too much fun to give up after only one poem. Realizing this, I decided to try it as an exercise with other writers, and it immediately took off. The list form is simple and familiar, and the question of where you are from reaches deep.

Since then, the poem as a writing prompt has traveled in amazing ways. People have used it at their family reunions, teachers have used it with kids all over the United States, in Ecuador and China; they have taken it to girls in juvenile detention, to men in prison for life, and to refugees in a camp in the Sudan. Its life beyond my notebook is a testimony to the power of poetry, of roots, and of teachers. My thanks to all of you who have taken it to heart and handed it on. It's a thrill to read the poems you send me, to have a window into that many young souls.

I hope you won't stop there, though. Besides being a poem in its own right, "Where I'm From" can be a map for a lot of other writing journeys. Here are some things I've thought of:

Where to Go with "Where I'm From"

While you can revise (edit, extend, rearrange) your "Where I'm From" list into a poem, you can also see it as a corridor of doors opening onto further knowledge and other kinds of writing. The key is to let yourself explore these rooms. Don't rush to decide what kind of writing you're going to do or to revise or finish a piece. Let your goal be the writing itself. Learn to let it lead you. This will help you lead students, both in their own writing and in their response as readers. Look for these elements in your WIF poem and see where else they might take you:

- a place could open into a piece of descriptive writing or a scene from memory.
- your parents' work could open into a memory of going with them, helping, being in the way. Could be a remembered dialogue between your parents about work. Could be a poem made from a litany of tools they used.
- an important event could open into freewriting all the memories of that experience, then writing it as a scene, with description and dialogue. It's also possible to let the description become setting and directions and let the dialogue turn into a play.
- food could open into a scene at the table, a character sketch of the person who prepared the food, a litany of different experiences with it, a process essay of how to make it.
- music could take you to a scene where the music is playing; could provide you the chance to interleave the words of the song and words you might have said (or a narrative of what you were thinking and feeling at the time the song was first important to you ("Where I'm Singing From").
- something someone said to you could open into a scene or a poem which captures that moment; could be what you wanted to say back but never did.
- a significant object could open into a sensory exploration of the object-what it felt, sounded, smelled, looked, and tasted like; then where it came from, what happened to it, a memory of your connection with it. Is there a secret or a longing connected with this object? A message? If you could go back to yourself when this object was important to you, what would you ask, tell, or give yourself?

Remember, you are the expert on you. No one else sees the world as you do; no one else has your material to draw on. You don't have to know where to begin. Just start. Let it flow. Trust the work to find its own form.