

Where I'm From



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.

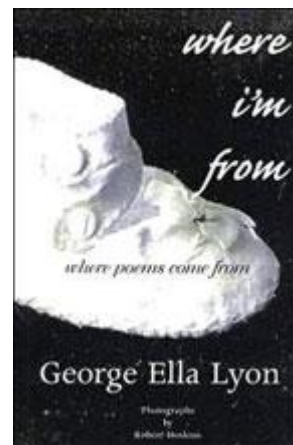
I'm from Artemus and Billie's Branch,
fried corn and strong coffee.
From the finger my grandfather lost
to the auger,
the eye my father shut to keep his sight.

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.

“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.”

[Listen to George
Ella read the poem.](#)

***Check out the book
Where I'm From, Where
Poems Come From***



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:

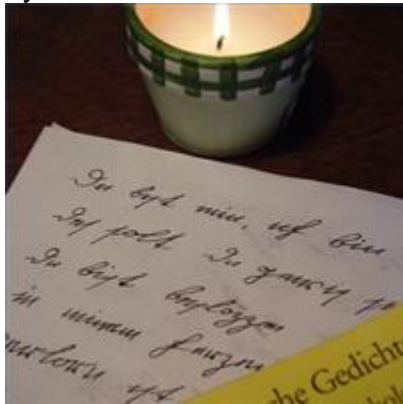
- a place could open into a piece of descriptive writing or a scene from memory.
- your parents' work could open into a memory of going with them, helping, being in the way. Could be a remembered dialogue between your parents about work. Could be a poem made from a litany of tools they used.
- an important 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.

How to Write a "Where I'm From" Poem

By an eHow Contributor



Write a "Where I'm From" Poem

If you want to write a beautifully [therapeutic](#) and personal poem, then the "Where I'm From" poem is perfect. You'll create a piece of writing that represents specific moments in your life that contribute to who you are today. This poem encourages tolerance and awareness of our own personal experiences and can be rewritten over and over again. Imagine being able to express where you're from without simply saying the name of a city, state or country. This poem is about YOU!

Difficulty: Easy

Instructions

Prewriting

1. 1

Use the following categories to list specific details related to you. The key is making this as specific and personal as possible. Use nicknames or words that only you or your [family](#) use. Don't worry about readers not knowing what you're talking about.

- a) Parent's names and significant relatives
- b) Special **foods** or meals
- c) **Family** specific **games** or activities
- d) Nostalgic songs
- e) Stories, novels or poetry that you'll never forget
- f) Phrases that were repeated often
- g) The best things that you were told
- h) The worst things that you have been told
- i) Ordinary household items
- j) Family traditions
- k) Family traits
- l) Family tendencies
- m) Religious symbols or experiences
- n) Specific story(ies) about a specific family member that influenced you
- o) Accidents or traumatic experiences
- p) Losses
- q) Joys
- r) Location of memories, pictures, or mementos

2. 2

Select from your lists the items you want to include in your poem. You do not have to include everything that you listed, and you can always add more categories or items to include in your poem.

3. 3

Use the resource link to read the original "Where I'm From" poem by George Ella Lyons. You'll discover there are items, people and situations mentioned in this poem with which you are unfamiliar. That's perfectly okay, because this poem is personal and particular to the poet, not the audience.

Composing

4. 1

Begin with: I am from _____. (Fill in with one of the items you listed while prewriting.)

5. 2

Continue on the next line with: From_____ and _____ . (Fill in each blank with items from your list.)

6. 3

Continue with: I am from _____ and _____ . (Fill in the blanks as you did before.) Continue this format until you have completed your poem.

7. 4

End the poem with an explanation of where you keep any symbols, items, boxes or pictures that may represent some or most of the topics you included in your poem.

8. 5

Reread your poem and make any changes or edits. This poem can be rewritten over and over again, and you'll probably find yourself thinking about more things that you can add to your poem even when you are finished.

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Tips & Warnings

- Put a copy of this poem in a scrapbook or memory book for future generations to read.
- Give this poem as a gift to your parents or children. They will treasure it forever.
- Feel free to change the format of the poem. I've presented only a suggested format for writing this poem.
- Writing this poem may bring up emotions that you weren't prepared to confront. Consider the writing of this poem as a means of free therapy.
- If you discover traumatic experiences that you have forgotten, please see a therapist or speak to someone you trust.

Resources

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- [C.A.R.T.S.: Original "Where I'm From" Poem by George Ella Lyons](#)
 - [Fred First: "Where I'm From" Template](#)
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Read more: [How to Write a "Where I'm From" Poem | eHow.com](http://www.ehow.com/how_4615832_write-_where-i_m-from_-poem.html#ixzz1BKqsmeEW)
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