

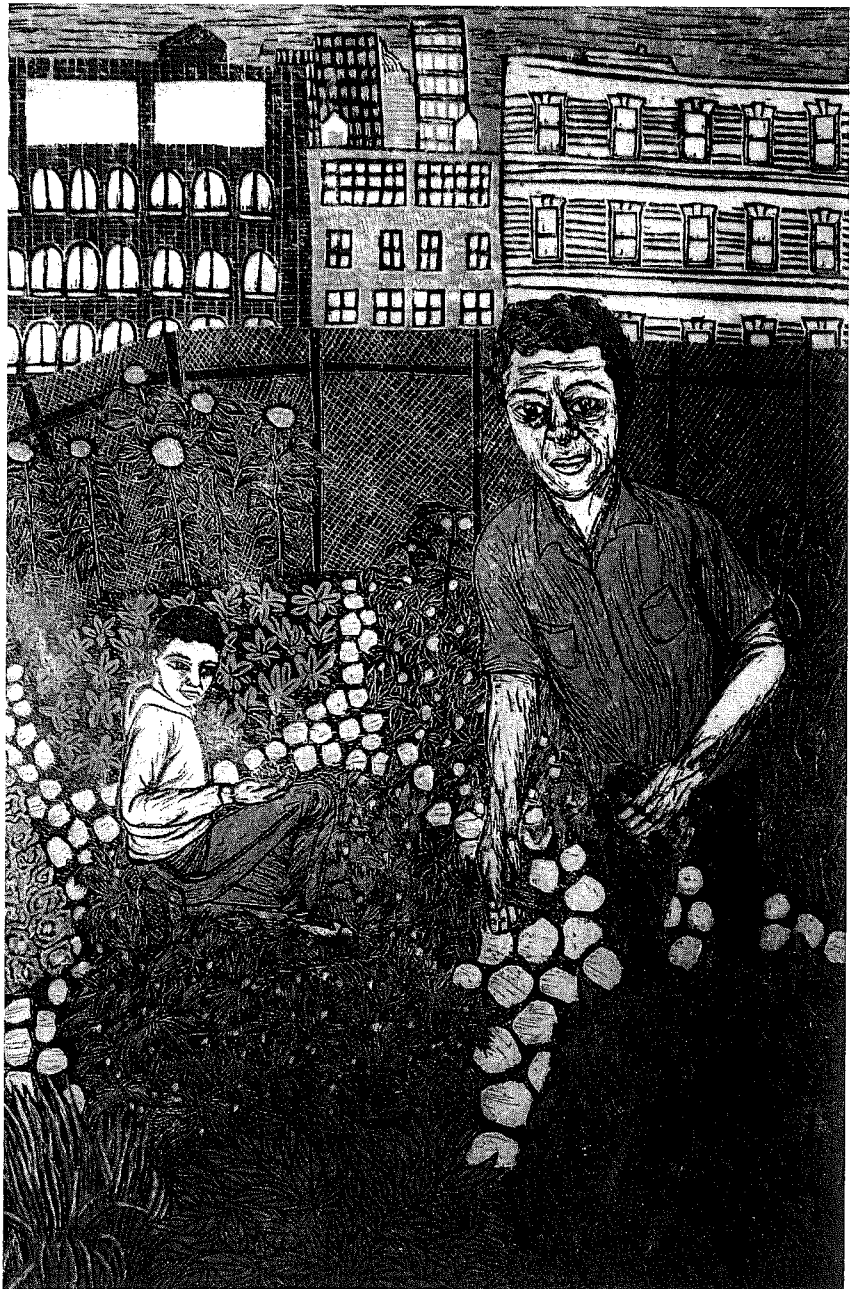
Where I'm From

Inviting students' lives into the classroom

BY LINDA CHRISTENSEN

Over the years since this lesson was first printed, I have received poems from teachers in classrooms across the world, from elementary through graduate schools, sharing with me the lives of countless students from Sam Leach's gap-tooth 3rd graders in north Portland to Ron Baer's students who sling words like slam poets in Los Angeles.

Astra Cherry, one of my dear friends and colleagues from the National Writing Project, taught



MEREDITH STERN

this poem to her children and siblings and built “Where I’m From” bags for each member of her family. Alma Flor Ada used this poem in her social justice literacy classes at the University of San Francisco, and her students created *Where I’m From* books to share with their students. Deborah Appleman, professor at Carleton College, taught the lesson through the Minnesota Prison Writing Workshop at a number of prisons in Minnesota. Beverly Tatum, currently president of Spelman College, used the poem to help students identify and share their cultural backgrounds when she was dean at Mount Holyoke College. Jana Potter, the youth program manager at Mercy Corps in Portland, Ore., created a dialogue between Portland, Palestinian, and Iraqi youth through the poem.

Why is this poem so popular? First, George Ella Lyon wrote an amazing poem. In the Oregon Writing Project, we talk about the “bones of the poem,” the structure of the poem. Lyon’s “Where I’m From” has good bones that help students organize their poems by standing on ground she tilled before us, so students of all ages can write about where they are from. This poem starts the year with a home run paper on the wall from every kid in the classroom. There are no rhyme schemes to follow. There are no fancy literary terms that too often separate students from the daily language of their lives. There are *just* the facts of their lives, and the beauty of those facts adds up to a literary show-and-tell about students’ cultures.

In his essay “The Ground on Which I Stand,” August Wilson wrote:

Growing up in my mother’s house at 1727 Bedford Ave. in Pittsburgh, Pa., I learned the language, the eating habits, the religious beliefs, the gestures, the notions of common sense, attitudes towards sex, concepts of beauty and justice, and the response to pleasure and pain, that my mother had learned from her mother, and which could trace back to the first African who set foot on the continent. It is this culture that stands solidly on these shores today as a testament to the resiliency of the African-American spirit.

And this is what each of our students learned

in their homes: language, food, religion, the stories (sometimes) of their people. We hear this in the do-rags and prayer plants from Oretha Storey’s poem, in the words of Lealonni Blake’s strict dad, “sit yo’ fass self down.” We hear the pain and resiliency in HEND Abu Lamzy’s poem about Palestine, “I am from a village I’ve never seen.”

I still remember the teachers who brought my home and culture into school. I recall holding my father’s hand as he read my story hanging on the display wall outside Mrs. Martin’s 3rd-grade classroom on the night of Open House. I remember the sound of change jingling in Dad’s pocket, his laughter as he called my mom over and read out loud the part where I’d named the cow “Lena” after my mother and the chicken “Walt” after my father. It was a moment of sweet joy for me when my two worlds of home and

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school bumped together in a harmony of reading, writing, and laughter.

In my junior year of high school, I skipped most of my classes, but each afternoon I crawled back through the courtyard window of my English class. There were no mass assignments in Ms. Carr’s class: She selected novels and volumes of poetry for each student to read. Instead of responding by correcting my errors, she wrote notes in the margins of my papers asking me questions about my home, my mother, my sister who’d run away, my father who’d died three years before.

These two events from my schooling capture part of what the editors of *Rethinking Our Classrooms: Teaching for Equity and Justice* (1994) meant when we encouraged teachers to make students feel “significant” in our classrooms:

The ways we organize classroom life should seek to make children feel significant and cared about—by the teacher and by each other. Unless students feel emotionally and physically safe, they won’t share real thoughts and feelings. Discussions will be tinny and dishonest. We need to design ac-

tivities where students learn to trust and care for each other. Classroom life should, to the greatest extent possible, prefigure the kind of democratic and just society we envision, and thus contribute to building that society. Together students and teachers can create a “community of conscience,” as educators Asa Hilliard and George Pine call it.

Mrs. Martin and Ms. Carr made me feel significant and cared about because they invited my home into the classroom. They allowed me to bring the “ground on which I stand,” as August Wilson wrote, into school. When I wrote and included details about my family, they listened. They made space for me and my people in the curriculum.

In my classrooms over the last 40 years, I’ve attempted to find ways to make students feel significant and cared about as well, to find space for their lives to become part of the curriculum. I do this by inviting them to write about their lives, about the worlds from which they come. Our sharing is one of the many ways

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we begin to build community together. It “prefigures” a world where students can hear the home language from Diovana’s Pacific Islander heritage, Lurdes’ Mexican family, Oretha’s African American home, and my Norwegian roots, and celebrate without mockery the similarities as well as the differences.

Sometimes grounding lessons in students’ lives can take a more critical role, by asking them to examine how they have been shaped or manipulated by the media, for example. But as critical teachers, we shouldn’t overlook the necessity of connecting students around moments of joy as well.

George Ella Lyon’s poem invites my students’ families, homes, and neighborhoods into the classroom. Lyon’s poem follows a repeating pattern, “I am from. . .,” that recalls details, evokes memories—and can prompt some excellent poetry. Her poem allows me to teach about the use of specifics in poetry, and

writing in general. But the lesson also brings the class together through the sharing of details from our lives and lots of laughter and talk about the “old ones” whose languages and traditions continue to permeate the ways we do things today.

Teaching Strategy

I am mindful that my students do not all live in single dwelling homes with picket fences and big backyards. Many live in apartments or the “projects.” In recent times, students’ living situations have become more vulnerable, so some of my students live in transitional housing, hotel rooms, and sometimes cars. Other students are in and out of foster homes. I ask students to think of a place they consider “home” for this exercise.

1. After students read the poem out loud together, I note that Lyon begins many of her lines with the phrase “I am from.” I remind the class of William Stafford’s advice to find a hook to “link the poem forward” through some kind of device like a repeating line, so the poem can develop a momentum. I suggest they might want to use the line “I am from” or create another phrase that will move the poem.
2. We go line by line through the poem. I ask students to notice the details Lyon remembers about her past. After we read, I ask students to write lists that match the ones in Lyon’s poem and to share them out loud. We write each list, share each list, laugh, and add details. The idea is to fill the well so that when they move to write the poem, they have many details to choose from. This verbal sharing sparks memories and also gives us memories to share as we make our way through the lesson:
 - Items found around their home: bobby pins or stacks of newspapers, grandma’s false teeth in a jar by the bathroom sink, discount coupons for a Mercedes. (They don’t have to tell the truth. Sometimes the exaggeration tells as much as the truth.)
 - Items found in their yards, in the area surrounding their “home”: broken rakes, dog bones, hoses coiled like green snakes. (I encourage them to think of metaphors as they make their lists.)

- Items found in their neighborhood: the corner grocery store, Mr. Tate’s beat-up Ford Fairlane, the “home base” plum tree. I encourage them to be specific—include names of people, stores, streets. For example, I live on the corner of Fremont and Haight, around the block from More for Less Foods, across the street from the Living Gospel Church, and two blocks from Senn’s Drive-Thru Dairy.
- Names of relatives, especially ones that link them to their past: Aunt Eva and Uncle Einar, the Christensen and Richert branches.
- Sayings that spill out and remind them of home: “If I’ve told you once. . .” “Who gave you the authority?” My students have great lines for this one that either pull me back to my childhood or make me want to steal their families’ lines.
- Names of foods and dishes that recall family gatherings: lutefisk, tamales, black-eyed peas, chocolate mayonnaise cake, peach cobbler. Be prepared to get hungry.
- Names of places they keep their childhood memories: diaries, boxes, underwear drawers, inside the family Bible.

3. We share our lists out loud as we brainstorm. I encourage them to make their piece “sound like home,” using the names and language of their home, their family, their neighborhood. The students who write vague nouns like “shoes” or “magazines” get more specific when they hear their classmates shout out “*Jet*,” “*Latina*,” “pink tights crusted with rosin.” Out of the chaos, the sounds, smells, and languages of my students’ homes emerge in poetry.

4. Once they have their lists of specific words, phrases, and names, I ask students to highlight the pieces from their lists that most clearly show where they are from. The poet’s job is to cherry-pick the best details, not use everything from their brainstorming. I encourage them to find some kind of link or phrase like “I am from” to weave the poem together, and to end the poem with a line or two that ties their present to their past, their family history. For example, in Lyon’s poem, she ends with “Under my bed was a dress box/spilling old pictures . . . I am from those moments.”

5. After students have written a draft, we “read around.” (See p. 240 for a detailed description of this activity.) This is an opportunity for students to feel “significant and cared about,” in the words of *Rethinking Our Classrooms*, as they share their poems. ✱

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Resource

Lyon, George Ella. “Where I’m From.” *Where I’m From, Where Poems Come From*. Spring, TX: Absey and Co., 1999.

Where I'm From

by 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 am 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

by Renée Watson

I'm made up of East Coast hip-hop and island tradition.

I'm from Baptist hymns and secular jigs.
Tambourine playin', late night stayin'
at the church house, or my friend's house, or their
friend's house
(on the weekends).

Where I'm from there are corduroyed hand-me-downs
and family keepsakes.
Family pictures on the wall. Open Bible on the coffee
table.

I'm from *that* side of town.
Where the media only comes for bloodshed. Blood
wasted.
Never for blood restored, celebrated, or regenerated.

I'm from hopscotch and double Dutch.
Hide-n-go seek and Pac-Man.

I'm from curry goat, rice and peas and beef patties.
From turquoise blue water, white sand, and
dreadlocks.
Reggae is in my blood.

Grew up in the Pacific Northwest. A place where rain
falls
more than sun shines.

I'm from Douglas firs and pine trees,
where we walk under waterfalls,
drive up windy roads to Mt. Hood,
and escape to the beaches on the Oregon coast.

Where I'm from music takes away the blues.
I'm from Bob Marley. Mahalia Jackson. Aretha
Franklin. James Brown.
I'm from Jackson 5 records and New Edition tapes.
I'm from rewinding tapes over and over and over
again
so you can write down the lyrics and memorize them.

Where I'm from the whole neighborhood is your family
ladies sit on their porches looking out for you
shooing away boys like flies.

Callin' your momma to tell what you did
before you can get home and lie about it.

Where I'm from people ask my friend,
"Is that your hair?" and she says, "Yeah it's mine.
I bought it!"

I'm from divorce being passed down to children like
a family heirloom.

I'm from single mommas pushing strollers,
praying that their babies don't make the same
mistakes as them.

I'm from a little goes a long way, from sun gonna
shine after the rain.

I'm from persevering souls and hardworking hands.
From a people destined to make it to their
promised land.

I'm from been there, done that, can and will do it
again.

Now you, tell me—where you from?

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*Renée Watson (reneewatson.net) is an author, performer,
and educator. She teaches poetry at DreamYard in New
York City.*

I Am from Soul Food and Harriet Tubman

by Lealonni Blake

I am from get-togethers
and Bar-B-Ques
K-Mart special with matching shoes.
Baseball bats and BB guns,
a violent family is where I'm from.

I am from "get it girl"
and "shake it to the ground."
From a strict dad named Lumb
sayin' "sit yo' fass self down."

I am from the smell of soul food
cooking in Lelinna's kitchen.
From my Pampa's war stories
to my granny's cotton pickin'.

I am from Kunta Kinte's strength,
Harriet Tubman's escapes.
Phillis Wheatley's poems,
and Sojourner Truth's faith.

If you did family research,
and dug deep into my genes.
You'll find Sylvester and Ora, Geneva and Doc,
My African Kings and Queens.
That's where I'm from.

I Am from Swingsets and Jungle Gyms

by Debby Gordon

I am from jars for change collections,
cards from Grandma,
and chocolate milk.

I am from swingsets and jungle gyms
rusted metal mounted in dirt
used by many kids,
well broken in.

I am from the cherry tree,
and the pudgy faces climbing out on the branches
for a piece of juicy red fruit.

I am from tattletales,
keep-it-froms,
and "shut up and listen to me."
I am from Rice Crispy Treats,
and pretty rings,
from Melvin and Earline.

I'm from Will and Sharon's long branch,
chunky peanut butter and jelly,
from the house we lost to fire,
and surgeries we all have had.

I am from the old scrapbooks,
where pictures,
remind me of days that live only in the minds
of those of us who were there.

I am from the people who paved a way for me,
I am from the best that could be,
and I am the best I could be.

I Am from. . .

by Oretha Storey

I am from bobby pins, do-rags
and wide-toothed combs.
I am from tall grass, basketballs and
slimy slugs in front of my home.
I am from prayer plants that lift
their stems and rejoice every night.

I am from chocolate cakes and deviled
eggs that made afternoon snacks just right.
I am from older cousins and hand-me-downs
to “shut ups” and “sit downs.”

I am from Genesis to Exodus
Leviticus too.
Church to church, pew to pew.

I am from a huge family tree,
that begins with dust and ends with me.

In the back of my mind there lies a dream
of good “soul food” and money trees.
In this dream I see me on top makin’
ham hocks, fried chicken
and smothered pork chops.
I am from family roots and blood
Oh, I forgot to mention love.

I Am from Pink Tights and Speak Your Mind

by Djamila Moore

I am from sweaty pink tights encrusted in rosin
bobby pins
Winnie-the-Pooh
and crystals.

I am from awapuhi ginger
sweet fields of sugarcane
green bananas.

I am from warm rain cascading over
taro leaf umbrellas.
Crouching beneath the shield of kalo.

I am from poke, Brie cheese, mango,
and raspberries,
from Marguritte
and Auntie Nani.

I am from speak your mind
it’s OK to cry
and would you like it if someone did that to you?

I am from swimming with
the full moon,
Saturday at the Laundromat,
and Easter crepes.

I am from Moore and Cackley
from sardines and haupia.
From Mirana’s lip Djavan split,
to the shrunken belly
my grandmother could not cure.

Seven diaries stashed among
Anne of Green Gables.
Dreams of promises
ending in tears.
Solidifying to salted pages.

I am from those moments of
magic
when life remains a
fairy tale.

Where I'm From

by Camila Calderon

I am from my pink baby blanket
from my *abuela's* picture
and my stuffed bear Lucesita.

Yo soy del árbol sombroso
from quiet friends playing on the swings
and a gunshot in the night.

I am from my mom who comes from México and loves
to dance
from my daddy who comes from México and plays
soccer with us
and from my grandma who lives in México and who I
miss.

I am from "Cami" "Pollito" and "Gordito."

I am from *posole con pollo*
ensalada y rábanos
y tacos dorados con pollo, tomates, crema y queso.

I am from my mom and daddy who are proud to be
from México
and my grandma who is from beautiful México.

I am from *el Día de los Muertos*
when my family eats special food
and we celebrate my grandpa's life.

I am Camila.
I am kind
respectful
and friendly.

I am from many places
I am Camila.

Where I'm From

by Roberto Alba

I am from a picture of my grandpa, my dad and me
a picture of my dog Nico
and dream catchers that remind me of my Native
American heritage.

I am from the pear tree my family shares with our
neighbors
the chimney swifts that come at night
and the gunshots that make me nervous.

I am from my mom and dad who care for and love me
my two older sisters who love me too
and my baby sister who slobbers on me.

I am from "¡Adiós!" and "Go to bed, Roberto!"

I am from my Native American grandma's meatloaf
and my *tía's* green candy tamales.

I am from my mom who's proud to be Native American,
Mexican, and Italian
my dad who is Mexican American
and my grandma who is Mexican too.

I am from my sister's fun *quinceañera*
from wearing my fancy clothes and dancing slow
I am from getting blessed by the Eagle feather
the sound of drums
and dancing in circles.

I am Roberto
I have many different cultures
I like to help people
I am a peacemaker.

I am from many places
I am Roberto.