

FOR ALL OUR VOICES

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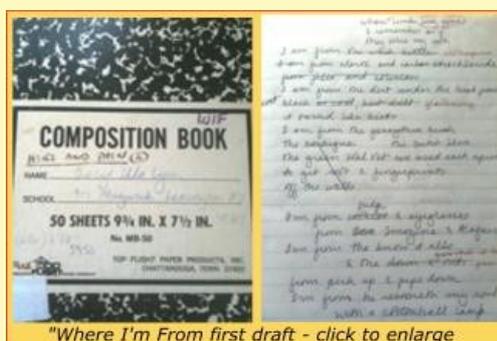


Happy Birthday to "Where I'm From"!

Twenty years ago, on the Summer Solstice in 1993, I began a poem called "Where I'm From." Here's the notebook I wrote it in, bought at the Radford University Bookstore where I was teaching in the Highland Summer Conference.



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"Where I'm From" first draft - click to enlarge

I see from the cover that I was writing *Here and Then*, a Civil War time-travel novel here too.

Little did I dream, when I began this poem on page one of my new notebook that I was starting a process that would involve countless teachers and writers, young and old, in the US and Germany, Great Britain, China, and the Sudan, that folks would write "Where I'm From" poems in prison, refugee camps, homeless shelters, ESL programs, and children's hospitals. Just as my poem took off from a poem in Jo Carson's *Stories I Ain't Told Nobody Yet*, and hers took off from something she heard somebody say, so "Where I'm From" has been handed around the world like sourdough starter. It's been part of photo exhibits, videos, obituaries, family reunions, and dance. "I'm from the...pass-it-ons" the poem says, and that's what keeps happening, a testimony to the power of place, of poetry, of teachers, and of the hunger for a voice.

I've written many WIF poems since. The possibilities are endless since we're from different experiences on different days. Today I'm from a bout of shingles, whole wheat bread with peanut butter, and gratitude that it's finally stopped raining!

NEWS

PICTURE BOOKS:



["Which Side Are You On?" The Story of a Song](#), illus. by Christopher Cardinale, has won the Anne IZard Storyteller's Choice Award given by librarians, storytellers, and educators in Westchester, NY.



Boats Float! a picture book co-written with my son Benn Lyon, has been accepted by Richard Jackson at Atheneum.



Here's the cover of [Planes Fly!](#) illustrated by Mick Wiggins and coming from Atheneum in July.



POETRY:

This week I turned in the proof for *Many-Storied House*, which will be out from the University Press of Kentucky next fall. Working through each poem, I revisited all those moments in my growing-up house, a rich and Kleenex-laden experience.

QUOTATIONS recently copied into my journal

"You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you odd."
-Flannery O'Connor

"The master sticks to her tools."
-Lao-Tzu

WRITING EXERCISE and POEM

POEM:

WHAT I LOOKED LIKE IN THE 80'S

A blur chasing a small boy.
A face behind a windshield, hand on the wheel.
A short, round, ever rounder woman
with another boy becoming inside. A milk-dripper.
Stretch-pants and loose-top mama cradling a baby in
one arm and handing out orange slices to the soccer team
with the other. Curly-headed woman in an ink-spotted gown
finding words to lead me to this poem.

WRITING PROMPT:

Like "Where I'm From," the poem above is just a list. I selected these lines from a much longer list of images of myself years ago. Once I got the line about being a blur, I was on my way, but I didn't start out with that. And I didn't know the poem was going to end up in the present. That was a gift.

Pick a time in your life enough distant from now that you have some perspective on it. Pretend you are a camera and make verbal snapshots of yourself back then. You may want to do this over several days. Then read them back and see what they say to you. Pick the ones with the most energy, read them out loud, and play with arrangement of lines until they feel right. You may get a whole new vision of yourself.

HAPPY SUMMER!

To those of you who teach, best of luck (and strength and humor) as the school year comes to a close. And to everyone, this new season is a great time for developing what Flannery O'Connor calls "the habit of art," so get out those notebooks. The wealth of yourself awaits you. And you never know when your words may go around the world.

George Ella Lyon

