

# George Ella Lyon | WRITER & TEACHER

HOME

MY STORY

BOOKS

SCHOOL &  
LIBRARY VISITS

WORKSHOPS  
FOR WRITERS

FAMILY LITERACY  
PRESENTATIONS

ACTIVISM

FOR TEACHERS  
& LIBRARIANS

STRANDS

WHERE I'M FROM

PRESS

APPEARANCES

[Sign up for E-news](#)

[E-news archive](#)

## Where I'm From

In response to the fear- and hate-mongering alive in our country today, I have joined Julie Landsman?a writer, teacher, and activist based in Minneapolis?to create the I Am From Project. Through our website ([iamfromproject.com](http://iamfromproject.com)) and [Facebook page](#), we're collecting art from around the country prompted by that theme. You can listen to our interview on the National Writing Project radio here: <https://www.nwp.org/cs/public/print/resource/4673>.



We want to gather the diversity of our voices, and we plan to archive the results online and to present them, in some form, in D.C. We'd love to have your voice among them!

The Kentucky Arts Council has wrapped up my Where I'm From?project with a total of 731 poems from eighty-three counties. My thanks to everyone at the Council, especially Tamara Coffey, who [put all those poems online](#). You can [visit this website](#) to find the map where you can click on any county and read offerings from poets of all ages.



## 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.

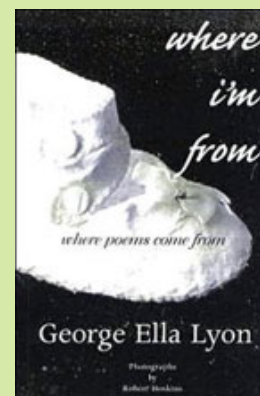
I'm from fudge and eyeglasses,  
from Imogene and Alafair.  
I'm from the know-it-alls  
and the pass-it-ons,  
from Perk up! and Pipe down!  
I'm from He restoreth my soul  
with a cottonball lamb  
and ten verses I can say myself.

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.

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



**[Check out the book \*Where I'm From, Where Poems Come From\*:](#)**



**[Click here to see an inventive video](#) featuring George Ella's reading of "Where I'm From" on *The United States of Poetry* episode "The Land and the People."**

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."

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"

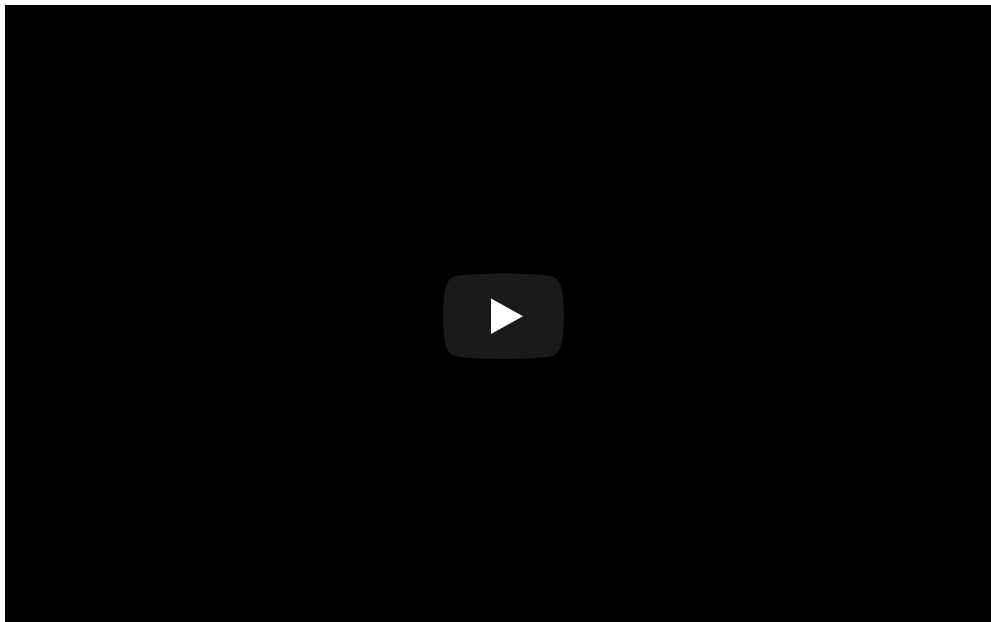
While you can revise (edit, extend, rearrange) your "Where I'm From" list into a poem, you can also see it as a corridor of doors opening onto further knowledge and other kinds of writing. The key is to let yourself explore these rooms. Don't rush to decide what kind of writing you're going to do or 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.

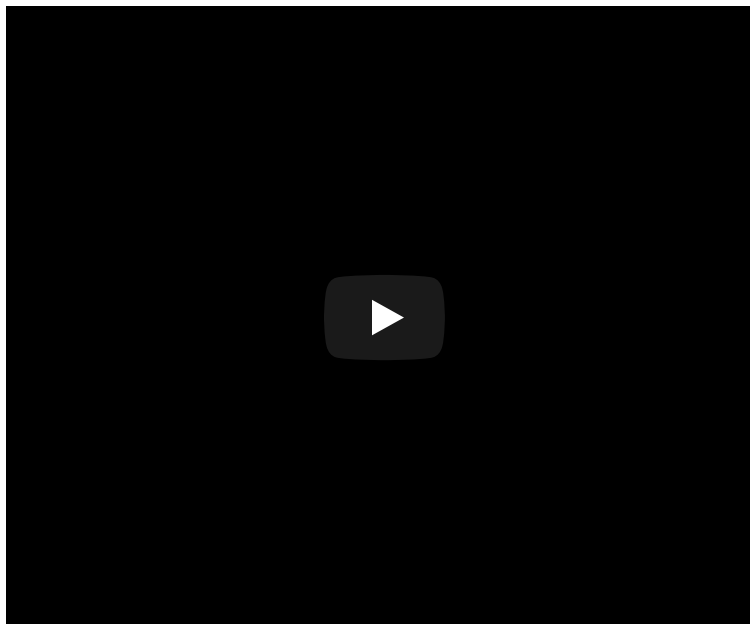
## Where Others Have Gone with "Where I'm From"

Watch a visual poem based on "Where I'm From" by George Ella Lyon, created by Julia Daniel for Tamalpais High School's Academy of Integrated Humanities and New Media (AIM), fall 2010:



### A Young Artist's Own "Where I'm From" in Words and Image:

*In Winter of 2008, Sage Hennequin Kuhens was enrolled in University of South Carolina Upstate's "Write Here, Write Now: Sharing Slices of Life Through the Magic of Digital Storytelling," a series of writing and publishing workshops sponsored by the Spartanburg Community Writing Center. At eight years old, Sage was the youngest among her group of about 50 or so students, and was determined to be as independent as she could be. Her delightful instructor, Tasha Thomas, encouraged her independence.*



I'm from big blue herons to small river otters,  
I'm from big Metasequoias to tall stalks of bamboo,  
I'm from cousins that were unknown to the closest of friends,  
I'm from my mom and dad to my lab-beagle dog, albino rats, and Madagascar hissing cockroaches,  
I'm from roaring water falls to silent flowing streams,

I'm from terrifying Zombie walks and Scarowinds to a gentle princess-loving godsister and godbrother  
I'm from pepperoni pizza to microwaved meatballs,  
I'm from my inspiration station drawing and writing to a homemade book,  
I'm from my old dog Chani to red-shouldered hawks,  
I'm from Jack the magic clown to my weird parents,  
I'm from a tiny baby to an educated sister showing baby MinMin what school's like,  
I'm from bold looking deer to relaxing foxes,  
I'm from making a fire in the county to ridin' in a cotton combine,  
I'm from a fan of Alexa Vega and Miley Cyrus to a spy lovin' tween (me),  
I'm from playing with cockroaches with a friend to Joe and I together,  
I'm from my heritages to Mom's mystery heritages,  
I have an opinion that none can change...life is great!

-Sage Hennequin Kuhens 1-29-08

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The Hale Pono Boys and Girls Club of Hawaii posted ?Where I?m From? by Dixie Castillo on their blog.  
[Read it here.](#)

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[Here?s a poem](#) based on ?Where I?m From? written by an eighth grade student as part of a study of  
*The Killer Angels*. The [lesson plan is here](#).

it all connects

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