

Story of Self: “Where I’m From” by Willie Perdomo

What is this? This poem by Willie Perdomo (date of publication unknown) is a write-alike inspired by George Ella Lyon’s original poem “Where I’m From,” from her poetry collection *Where I’m From* (1999).

Text:

Because she liked the “kind of music” that I listened to and she liked the way I walked as well as the way I talked, she always wanted to know where I was from.

If I said that I was from 110th Street and Lexington Avenue, right in the heart of a transported Puerto Rican town, where the hodedores live and night turns to day without sleep, do you think then she might know where I was from?

Where I’m from, Puerto Rico stays on our minds when the fresh breeze of café con leche y pan con mantequilla comes through our half-open windows and under our doors while the sun starts to rise.

Where I’m from, babies fall asleep to the bark of a German shepherd named Tarzan. We hear his wandering footsteps under a midnight sun. Tarzan has learned quickly to ignore the woman who begs her man to stop slapping her with his fist. “Please, baby! Por favor! I swear it wasn’t me. I swear to my mother! Mameeee!!” (Her dead mother told her that this would happen one day.)

Where I’m from, Independence Day is celebrated every day. The final gunshot from last night’s murder is followed by the officious knock of a warrant squad coming to take your bread, coffee and freedom away.

Where I’m from, the police come into your house without knocking. They throw us off rooftops and say we slipped. They shoot my father and say he was crazy. They put a bullet in my head and say they found me that way.

Where I’m from, you run to the hospital emergency room because some little boy spit a razor out of his mouth and carved a crescent into your face. But you have to understand, where I’m from even the dead have to wait until their number is called.

Where I’m from, you can listen to Big Daddy retelling stories on his corner. He passes a pint of light Bacardi, pouring the dead’s tributary swig unto the street. “I’m God when I put a gun to your head. I’m the judge and you in my courtroom.”

Where I'm from, it's the late night scratch of rats' feet that explains what my mother means when she says slowly, "Bueno, mijo, eso es la vida del pobre." (Well, son, that is the life of the poor.)

Where I'm from, it's sweet like my grandmother reciting a quick prayer over a pot of hot rice and beans. Where I'm from, it's pretty like my niece stopping me in the middle of the street and telling me to notice all the stars in the sky.

Part 1: Analysis

Read through the story of self above and then answer the questions below.

Text: “Where I’m From” by Willie Perdomo



1. What aspect of **selfhood** is this writer focusing on?

2. What are the **moments** or **events** they focus on in relation to that aspect of selfhood?

3. What is the **tone** of this piece? Or, how does this writer **feel** about the aspect of selfhood they are writing about?

4. What **details** and **images** they use to communicate that tone/feeling?

5. What are **three words** you would use to describe this writer, based on this piece of writing? What can you tell about their personality, values, or passions?

Part 2: Write-alike

A write-alike is an exercise in which you take inspiration from the format, structure, and themes of a piece of writing, but replace the original content with your own.

The Original:

“Where I’m From” is a free-verse poem, based on another free-verse poem, about the environment that has shaped the speaker.

Questions To Think About For Your Write-alike:

- What are the sensory details that come to mind when you close your eyes and think about where you come from? What does/did it feel, taste, smell, sound, and look like?
- What are some of the family or community traits you’ve inherited?
- What are some of the sayings or expressions that got repeated over and over in your home or community?
- What are some of the rituals or practices that come to mind when you think of your childhood?

Starters For Your Write-alike:

One way you might begin your write-alike is by imitating Perdomo’s second stanza, “If I said that I was from 110th Street and Lexington Avenue, right in the heart of a transported Puerto Rican town, where the hodedores live and night turns to day without sleep, do you think then she might know where I was from?”

You could start by writing, “If I said I was from _____, where _____, do you think people then might know where I’m from?”

Replace “110th Street and Lexington Avenue” with your own address or cross streets, and replace Perdomo’s geographical description with your own.

For example:

If I said I was from 1042 W. Harbor Hwy, where a state highway is just a two-lane country road winding along the perimeter of a pinky-shaped Lake Michigan peninsula, do you think people then might know where I’m from?

Then continue with more details and images from the environment that has shaped you.

Examples:

To find examples for this exercise, visit www.storiesofselfworkshop.com/writing_samples.html

- Faiza's "Where I'm From" write-alike
- Gabriel's "Where I'm From" write-alike
- Sarah's "Where I'm From" write-alike (from the curriculum developer)
- Eric Johnson's "Where I'm From" poem (not a student, but fun to see)

Your turn:

Set a timer for 15 minutes and go!



A large rectangular area containing 25 horizontal lines for writing, enclosed by a thin grey border.