

I Come From

Duration: 2 hours. The exercise can be simplified to contain it within an hour and still allow a sense of satisfaction of having done good work. However, its true benefits become more apparent the longer you spend doing it.

Age Range: 7 years to 70 years!

Workshop Aims: To generate poetry by tapping directly into our personal histories and memories.

Workshop Objectives: To write layered poetry using very simple triggers/stimuli

Equipment & Resources: Paper, pen.

Creative Outputs: This exercise is firmly focused on taking the intimidation out of writing poetry. The beauty of it is that it allows people who have never written poetry before to come away from the exercise feeling as if they have produced meaningful work that can be shared with other people.

Let's get started...

Introduction: Before you launch into the exercise, give some thought to what items you would pack into a suitcase of memories. These can be actual items but your suitcase can also include imaginary, metaphorical items too eg. ‘the powder sweetness of my baby brother’s skin’.

Watch: A film of the poem, **I Come From**, by Joseph Buckley. Try to listen to the words without being too influenced by the images:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gwjMRcae4Ps>

Progression: You will read through the transcript of Buckley’s poem, below, twice. The first time you read it, do so fairly quickly, noting down your first impressions. Think about what the poet is trying to say. Then read the poem again, slowly, paying attention to what each line is truly saying or doing. This process should take longer than you might think it should take. Don’t try to read poetry quickly as if it was a piece of prose. Be patient, interrogate each line as thoroughly as you can. You should find that the lines start to reveal much more than the poet has explicitly stated. As you read, think about the purpose of each stanza. What emotion does each stanza evoke? Note these down.

I Come From by Joseph Buckley

I come from blood fruit mango...
cashew nuts...
frozen fish fingers
dirty dishes and council gas heaters.

I come from concrete and coal
spaghetti Bolognese and shiny new BMXs...
from tea-tree oil, marijuana vapours
the damp heat of laundrettes...
holey jeans and moulded Mary bottles
of 'made in china' holy water.

I come from a world of miniature...
of powerlessness, of over-sized furniture
and scruffy trainers.Three steps
to mummy's one plastic dinosaur
and power rangers.

I come from the motorways my friend...
From the same journey three times a month...
like some weary old heart that takes a week to beat,
to beat out our old battered blood cell red Fiat
compelling it to crawl over the spinal cord
of these British Isles just one more time.

I come from heartbreak.
Or, more formally viewed underneath
the withering eye of the divorce courts...
Bisection of these bicuspid valves
the crack in my heart widens
into a crevasse.

I come from rainbows and thunderclouds
from ladybirds and dragonflies.
From fighting with fireworks on streets...
hop, skip, hope to miss the syringes.

I come from steel and sandstone
asphalt and coniferous forest.

I come from sweat, smell
and the invisible whirl of chromosomes.
I come from the warm pouch with umbilical cord.

I come from that first prehistoric spark
of enlightened consciousness

on an East African plain.

I come from the dense nuclei
flung from the wombs of stars.
But in the end I concede and say
the least needed of me.

I come from
I come from
I come from
Leeds.

Preparation to write: Make a list of the sources of personal histories and memories in the poem. These should all be ‘abstract’ nouns rather than ‘concrete’ nouns. See the tip below before making your list.

***Tip:** This website has a very good breakdown of the difference between abstract and concrete nouns. Read it thoroughly as it will give you a good grounding for how to approach making your own list which will in turn make it easier to approach writing your own poem:

<https://www.gingersoftware.com/content/grammar-rules/nouns/abstract-nouns/>

Make your list: It should include abstract nouns like family, friends, work, traditions, fashion, films, books, languages, travel etc. etc. Make your list as long and exhaustive as you possibly can.

Writing the first draft: Using the scaffold phrase ‘I come from’, write out your own list of personal memories and history. Don’t forget to include the items you’ve already thought about for your suitcase of memories. When you get stuck (and you will!), refer to the list of abstract nouns you have created. For instance, if you choose ‘books’ from your list of abstract nouns, think of specific books that have been meaningful in your life. Here is how I might write out that line:

“I come from the stories of Ananse, the spider, Noah’s ark and Chinua Achebe.”

Take note: Do you see how my line contains information about me that I haven’t explicitly stated? The stories of Ananse are from Ghana so you might begin to suspect that my family background is Ghanaian, which it is. You can also infer that reading the Bible (which is where the story of Noah’s Ark is from) was also a part of my early education. Perhaps I went to church every Sunday? Or maybe I went to Sunday school? Then I mention Chinua Achebe, one of Africa’s foremost literary figures. By telling you exactly which stories and books I am referring to, I also manage to tell you implicitly that I am Ghanaian, had an African upbringing, went to church and read the Bible when I was growing up without actually explicitly saying any of this!

***Tip:** It might seem counter-intuitive, but the more specific and precise you are in your lines, the more universal and informative your poetry can be for the reader. Poetry is often about the things that the poet **doesn't** say just as much as the things she **does** says. Here's another small lesson about being specific and precise:

"I come from a car" = Not specific and precise

versus:

"I come from a battered white Mercedes" = Very specific and precise

The first phrase is so nondescript that the reader cannot glean more information from the line other than that there was a car involved. The second phrase, however, tells the reader that not only was there a car, it was a car that is usually associated with someone who is rich. There is more. The word 'battered' would seem to imply that the person has fallen on hard times. So the car could have belonged to someone who was once rich but is now poor. Or it could have belonged to someone who was involved in a car accident. This is the way to build complexity into your poetry by the simple expedience of making your lines detailed with specificity and precision.

Development: Now, try to group your list into stanzas cohering around the items that naturally fit together. Then, play with the order of your stanzas to interrogate how they would naturally fit together, how they will flow into and from each other. You will want to make some decisions whether your stanzas are going to flow chronologically, thematically, emotionally or even more experimentally than that. Let your instincts guide you with this.

Editing: You may decide that not every line should begin with 'I come from' so go through the poem to see where that scaffold phrase can be removed from the lines without spoiling the integrity of the meaning of the line. You may find that you prefer to remove the scaffold phrase 'I come from' from all the lines. In which case, you may have to work the lines a bit harder in order to ensure that they flow from one to the other. On the other hand, you might like the sonic effect the repetition of 'I come from' gives to the poem and may choose to include it with all the lines.

Reading the poem aloud is one of the best tools for editing any piece of writing so read your poem aloud. This will give you more information on how you can improve the poem even further. Look out for where metaphor, simile, synesthesia, synecdoche, personification or other such imagery can be included. Pay attention to the senses!

Progression: If you'd like to push this method further within the same poem or even write a different accompanying poem, try to vary the scaffold phrase eg. 'I am made from' or 'I am for' which can connect to dreams and aspirations, looking ahead to the future.

Good luck and happy writing!