

WRITING EXERCISES
FROM THE “WHAT IS HOME” PROJECT



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INTRODUCTION

When I became Portsmouth Poet Laureate in spring 2005, I was charged with one principal mission: to create community through poetry. Since I had often wondered what it meant to be *at home*, either in a real home, within one's own body, or in the world at large, I decided to call the project WHAT IS HOME. Under the guidance of five writer/teachers: Marie Harris, Mark DeCarteret, Maren Tirabassi, Katherine Towler, and myself, the students set off on a writing journey that is still continuing. In addition, Hildred Crill, a former New Hampshire resident now residing in Stockholm, Sweden met with an international student body.

When we invited members of the seacoast community to participate in our writing workshops, we had no idea how many people would apply. While the classes were offered at no cost, we asked for a firm commitment to the six weeks of classes. To our amazement close to one hundred people were ready and eager to sign on. With an eye toward diversity and a desire to include people with no previous writing experience as well as those who had written some poetry, we invited sixty people to become, as one of my students succinctly put it, my poet laureate project.

Such close communities were forged that several are continuing to meet to write, read, and discuss their poems together. This teaching guide is our way of offering this experience to those of you who wish to explore the theme either alone or in a group of your own choosing. It is a rich theme, one that will raise questions, perhaps create some sense of loss or grief, but in the end I hope an experience with poetry and with others that is sustaining and rewarding. Enjoy!

Mimi White
Portsmouth Poet Laureate, 2005-2007

CONVERSATION

Hildred Crill

Goethe's admonishment, "Create, artist, do not talk," may have required some talking on his part. Dickinson, who spent much of her life in isolation, seems to have regarded the creation of a poem as sending a message to someone. At least in one poem, this communication remains a half exchange, "my letter to the World / That never wrote to Me." For Celan also, another solitary poet, a poem is addressed to an unspecified, unknown and possibly uninterested recipient, but as "manifestation of language" it is "thus essentially dialogue." However, the conversation may never become a normal give and take, rather "a message in a bottle, sent out in the—not always greatly hopeful—belief that somewhere and sometime it could wash up on land, on heartland perhaps." Thus, it seems, the elements of solitude and human connection may be strangely related as a source of tension in the making of poems. In avoidance of either extreme—talking over a poem so that it vanishes into nothingness or, on the other hand, banishing all human contact—a person might find a poem in this tension.

- find people in a city, on the subway, a bus or on a crowded street, and listen to them
- listen especially to languages you don't know or only half know
- meet a friend and talk in detail about something that is slightly peripheral to what you care deeply about
- listen to the echoes of this voice and your own voice later when you are alone
- listen also to the silences of the conversation and later to the silences of the poem

After an afternoon of conversation at Kulturhuset in central Stockholm, Sweden, on a snowy early spring day, it is this word and silence, its exact feeling of home that Cristina de los Reyes Diaz wrote about:

When the Hollowness is Filled

I feel at home when I am understood,
when the expression of my eyes is
without effort translated to a common language,
when sadness invades me and the right word,
smile, gesture comes and rides it away,
when silences are respected
and expected.

ARCHITECTURAL DIGEST

Mark DeCarteret

Starting in the cellar and making your way up to the attic of your childhood house, use each room (as well as any hallways, closets, nooks, etc.) as a starting place or what Richard Hugo refers to as "a base of operation," to extract different memories and images which can be utilized as both literal and metaphorical subject matter for a poem. "Our house is...our first universe," suggests Gaston Bachelard, "a real cosmos in every sense of the world." Explore how this house provides a blueprint for which your imagination can flourish and take shape, this physical structure that not only sets up the parameters of your sensory world but undoubtedly "shelters daydreaming." You might also want to think about the names that have been given these rooms (as well as their origins), checking into why a particular room warrants being called a "parlor" over a "living" or "family" room, or a "den" rather than a "study." Or better yet, attempt to "rename" each of the rooms (the "cavern," the "recoup room," etc.) to better suit or convey the experiences and sensations you associate with them.

I AM FROM

Marie Harris

Before the first session of the workshop, the participants were asked to bring a small, personally meaningful object with "home" associations.

At the first meeting of the workshop, instead of going around the table and introducing ourselves in the traditional manner, I asked everyone to spend ten or fifteen minutes writing in their notebooks:

Write where you're "from," in your own, truest definition of that concept. Without naming a specific place (country, state, town), describe where you are "from" using words for foods, aromas, music, natural elements, objects, languages (even specific words in those languages/dialects). Make use of the object you brought if you'd like.

At the end of 15 minutes, we read our "bios" aloud, bearing in mind that they were just notes, possibly for more crafted poems. This let us get to know one another in a most interesting, quirky way, and set a tone of trust that would carry through the ensuing sessions.

§§

Here are some writing excerpts from one session:

- "I am from the flowered-wallpaper room. ... from the brogue and long white braid and shrieking hearing aid of a grandmother whose cup-of-tea steam carried her back into mists she never returned from. ... from nuns with their white triangles fierce on their foreheads. ... from carrots peeled and cut--that my father taught me how to cut right, so if the Communists came they would find a use for me."
- "I am from here. ... I am walks in the woods, strolls on the beach, the smell of salt air."
- "The house on 38th St ... Or football on the high school field/ Climbing over chain link fence/ Saturdays during the Star Spangled banner/ With all the cops at attention"
- "I am from the wide open spaces, dry windswept prairies... (my father was a trucker and our home really was mobile)"
- "I am from survivors: resilient, strong, and damaged. ... I am from mimosa tree, from the dust/ Of the infield"
- "Women in pretty sundresses/ The men with deep voices and hearty laughs/ Clinking of ice cubes in summer cocktails"

- “I'm from the islands ... I'm from the Oyster River watershed, bounded/ By the waters of Swains Lake and Mendum's Pond”
- “I am not from here./ I don't have the accent. ... Spring comes much, much earlier where I'm from.”

*BEGINNING TO CONNECT:
REFLECTIONS & EXERCISES ON WHAT IS HOME*

Maren Tirabassi

Conversation (in a group) or Reflection (alone) about the theme:

Images of home on television

What does television say about home? -- *Leave it to Beaver* to *Will and Grace*,
Upstairs, Downstairs to *Extreme Makeover*

Images of home from children's books

Some of these are about making a home -- *The Wind in the Willows*, *Little House on the Prairie*, *The House at Pooh Corner*, *Goodnight Moon*
More are about leaving home or running away or being uncomfortable at home --
Harry Potter, *Peter Pan*, *Alice in Wonderland*, *Narnia*, *Huck Finn*

Images of home at the movies

How is home used to focus some of these films (or others you mentally collect)
The Trip to Bountiful, *Home Alone*, *My Life as a House*, *The Wizard of Oz*,
The Station Agent, *Gone with the Wind* (!)

What is your story about home? Does it hook into one of these cultural images ... or can you hear a song? Can you imagine a newspaper clipping or an artifact from your home or a family home? How do external sources impact your consideration of home?

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Home-work --Try one of these possible beginnings for a poem:

- 1) **From my Attic** -- Things part of your home which you are not using right now ... metaphor or "real stuff" -- what's in your attic?
- 2) **Animal homes** -- turtle shell ... beaver lodge ... hibernating bear's cave ... dog house ... eagle nest ... snake skin -- what animal home invites you?
- 3) **For Sale** --Write an ad for selling your home (not your house)
- 4) **I don't belong here** ... Harry Potter, Huck Finn, Dorothy, Davie Balfour Consider the absence of home in any form -- leaving home, running away from home, losing a home, becoming homeless, longing for home, being unwelcome at home, rejecting the values of home
- 5) **Not a place at all** ...Write about a *time* when you are at home -- wherever you are -- in the autumn, when I'm in church ... at work, when I'm drive at high speed or the *companion* which makes **any** place home ... your dog, books, computer ...
- 6) **A poem from quiet** ... sit completely quiet, meditating or staring out the window, trying to set aside thoughts ... Set a timer for fifteen minutes (or more) Write what

emerges from the silence.

7) **Poem sketching** (*based very loosely on an exercise by Sandy Lyne*)

Choose a set of four words from those offered below. Use the words in a poem or paragraph. You may change the forms of the words (add “s” or “ing” or “ed”).

remember
empty
room
light

winter
wind
shadow
listening

brick
sticks
straw
blow

wolf
burglar
crashing
faith

haunted
whisper
stairs
armchair

nest
shell
burrow
cave

mortgage
heart
kitchen
blessing

chez
welcome
years
bienvenue

porch
friendship
sunset
summer

runaway
hitchhike
grinning
tears

landlord
rent
worry
knocking

grandfather
chair
nursing home
story

New Orleans
levees
wind
jazz

birthplace
river
photograph
family

homely
mirror
snowflakes
loneliness

grandmother
table
apron
heartfelt

friends
road
tomorrow
goodbye

eviction
childhood
social worker
shame

home run
first base
outfield
strike

home
for
mask
holidays

kitchen
apple
cinnamon
laughter

shack
castle
condo
wherever

homecoming
cider
football
dance

motel
TV
vending
neon

doors
strangeness
opening
song

housework
dusting
weary
pride

apartment
beer cans
IKEA
roommates

Pakistan
earthquake
refugee
home

REMEMBERING HOME

Katherine Towler

What are our earliest memories of home? For some of us, they may be easy to retrieve. For others, they are far in the past, and perhaps buried, or not visited often. This writing exercise is focused on calling up some of our earliest memories and seeing where they take us.

We begin by reading two poems aloud: “Heat Wave” by Jeff Friedman and “Pillow” by Li-Young Lee. (See the poems below.) Both of these poems have childhood and memory as their territory. Through story and image, they evoke a time and place lost to the poets and powerfully convey a sense of longing and loss to the reader. These poems are meant to set the stage for the writing exercise that follows. You might want to wait to discuss the poems in any depth until after completing the writing exercise.

To begin the exercise, go back to the earliest place you can remember living and recall that house or apartment. If your childhood home has remained constant, you might want to pick another place you have not visited in many years, such as a grandparent’s home. Close your eyes and walk through the rooms of your early home. After a few moments, open your eyes and draw a floor plan of the house or apartment. This may be difficult for those going far back into the past. You may have only shadowy memories and a vague sense of various rooms, without knowing how they are connected. That’s okay. Do your best to tease out the memories and make a drawing, even if it’s incomplete.

Once you have finished your floor plan, take us back to this home in a piece of writing. You may write in poetry or prose, whatever comes most naturally. If you are writing with a group, give yourselves about 20 minutes to write, and then share the results by reading aloud. For further work, take what you produced for this exercise and use it as the basis for a poem.

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Heat Wave

My father arrives here
like a sudden wind
knocking down the leaves
of the sycamores.
He arrives on a hot
muggy night
when the dark clouds bulk
over the shingled roofs
and the rain refuses
to fall. The screen door

slams shut.
His suitcases bump
the walls and the chandelier
creaks on its chain over
the shiny formica table top.
When he enters my room
he carries the smell
of tar, asphalt,
twenty-one days
on the road, Peoria,
Decatur, Dayton,
the smell of disappointment –
Lavoris on his breath,
English Leather
slapped on his cheeks,
grips in his hands.
It is the summer when
his luck turns bad,
when his sales fall
and never rise again,
when his rich friends,
who started with him in business
twenty years before,
no longer return his calls. Under
the sheets I pretend
to be asleep though
I feel his eyes staring.
It is the summer of no
extra money to spend,
no raise in allowance,
the fan on the fritz.
All night I hear him
rise from his bed
and walk through the apartment
looking for a room
where he can rest.

- Jeff Friedman

“Heat Wave” reprinted from *Taking Down the Angel* by permission of Carnegie-Mellon University Press ©2003 by Jeff Friedman

Pillow

There's nothing I can't find under there.
Voices in the trees, the missing pages
of the sea.

Everything but sleep.

And night is a river bridging
the speaking and the listening banks,

a fortress, undefended and inviolate.

There's nothing that won't fit under it:
fountains clogged with mud and leaves,
the houses of my childhood.

And night begins when my mother's fingers
let go of the thread
they've been tying and untying
to touch toward our fraying story's hem.

Night is the shadow of my father's hands
setting the clock for resurrection.

Or is it the clock unraveled, the numbers flown?

There's nothing that hasn't found home there:
discarded wings, lost shoes, a broken alphabet.

Everything but sleep. And night begins

with the first beheading
of the jasmine, its captive fragrance
rid at last of burial clothes.

- Li-Young Lee

"Pillow" from *Book of My Nights*, 2001, Li-Young Lee, BOA Editions, Ltd.
www.boaeditors.org

AT HOME IN THE NATURAL WORLD

Mimi White

“I quickly found myself two such blessings- the natural world, and the world of writing: literature...” writes Mary Oliver in her collection of essays *Blue Pastures*. Using Mary Oliver as inspiration, go in search of her poems. Bookstores, libraries, friends’ bookshelves will abound with her poems. She is one of the most beloved of contemporary poets and with good reason: she writes the poem we wish we had written and she brings the world of nature to our doorsteps.

With notebook in hand, take a walk. Walk for miles, get lost, pause to note what you are seeing, hearing, thinking. You might make a sketch of something up close or off on the horizon. Take your time. If words or phrases come to mind, jot them down. Do this several times, for several weeks, or devote one long day to your carefree explorations. Gather stones, or twigs, broken eggs. *Pay attention.*

In the quiet of evening or early morning, whenever you find yourself at peace, write a poem that includes some of the words and images you gathered on your walks. Reread Mary Oliver from time to time. Study how she builds her poems. What can you borrow from her, what can you save from your walk and place in your poem?

§§

Or, if you have a great window as Hanna Frank does, look out your window. Become familiar with your own back yard. Let what you see inspire a poem or two, or maybe a sequence as Hanna has created in the poems below:

(from “Fifty Reasons Not To Leave My Room” by Hanna Frank)

Kingfisher

A deliberate dive
he splashes
into the water,
fishing,
his padded little feet
land
on the birdhouse
as he eats his feast

Hawk

A hawk has the power to pause all movement
of the multitudes of birds and small mammals in my yard.

Geese

all morning
I glimpsed
the long majestic necks
preening their plump
bodies in the sun
just as I got serious
to watch
off they went
into the sky
leaving behind
the ducks

TEXT & IMAGES

Construction of a basic journal for text and visual art

Merrilyn San Soucie

Materials: per student

- one 3" X 16" medium weight paper
- two 2 ¼" X 3 ¼" cardboard
- crayons, markers, colored pencils, gel markers, extra fine line sharpies
- scraps of colored paper cut into irregular forms with varied colors - the largest side should be shorter than 2".

Each student also needs a ready to publish text. This can be a collection of short poems or a single poem. Rough plans should be made for each line or poem to be illustrated on paper measuring 2" x 3". How the text will be added and where should be planned as well as how the art work will be executed- colored pencil, crayon etc.

Steps:

Fold the 3" x 16" piece as a fan/accordion, into 8 pages each measuring 2".

Each student receives one of these and writes text onto the pages.

Illustrations are added on the page with the text as well as on adjacent pages.

The two larger and heavier pieces of cardboard are the covers. They should be designed to introduce the content of the text.

Using the scraps of paper and thinking of the colors and ideas of the text, students create images or abstractions on each cover. These will be glued in position and then the covers are glued to the first and last panel of the accordion.

Connections & Variations:

- The art and writing of picture books
- Writing of a short poetic form such as Haiku
- Visual art techniques such as watercolors
- Paint the paper prior to folding, dry, press
- Visual art work can be done on separate pieces to glue onto the pages.
- Covers could be done following study of a writer or artist and used as the writing prompt for the inside. (i.e. Matisse or Leo Lionni)
- The "back" of the paper provides more possibilities.

Web site: www.dickblick.com lesson plans 2006

REACTION

Harvey Shepard

Find a poem about Home (perhaps from the Reading List at the end of this Exercise Book or from the WHAT IS HOME project collection of poems*) that brings up negative feelings in you – such as annoyance, anger, disgust, fear, ...

Now write a poem in reaction to this poem. One way of doing this is to type out the poem you are reacting to and leave several lines of space between the poem's lines. Then work your way down the poem responding/reacting/countering each line. When you are finished, rework your poem so that it is independent of the original poem. Type out your completed poem separately.

(For another exercise take your completed poem and write a reaction to it! Do not look at the original poem that started this all out. When you are finished, look back and compare it to the original poem.)

* See the Portsmouth Poet Laureate Program website, www.pplp.org, for information on where to obtain a copy of the WHAT IS HOME Chapbook.

READING LIST FOR THE “WHAT IS HOME” PROJECT

Once you start thinking about the theme of home, you realize that most great works of literature deal with this theme in some way – the desire for a home that is lost, the search for a place where we can feel at home or know ourselves as part of the world, the making of a new home or society, how home or a lack of home defines us, belonging and not belonging. Below are suggested titles and authors who touch on these themes.

Poetry

Emily Dickinson
Robert Frost
Rainer Maria Rilke (German, in translation)
Anna Akhmatova (Russian, in translation)
W. H. Auden
Dylan Thomas
Paul Celan (German, in translation)
Pablo Neruda (Spanish, in translation)
Theodore Roethke
Sylvia Plath
James Wright
Mary Oliver
Jane Kenyon
Adam Zagajewski (Polish, in translation)
Charles Simic
Seamus Heaney
Li-Young Lee
Stanley Kunitz
David Budbill
Eavan Boland

Fiction

Jane Eyre, Charlotte Bronte
Bleak House and *David Copperfield*, Charles Dickens
Huckleberry Finn, Mark Twain
The Awakening, Kate Chopin
The Country of the Pointed Firs, Sarah Orne Jewett
Ethan Frome, Edith Wharton
To the Lighthouse, Virginia Woolf
Tess of the D'Urbervilles, Thomas Hardy
Hunger, Knut Hamsun
Island (stories) and *No Great Mischief* (novel), Alistair MacLeod
A Fanatic Heart (stories), Edna O'Brien
The Collected Stories of Isaac Bashevis Singer
Other Voices, Other Rooms and *The Grass Harp*, Truman Capote
July's People, Nadine Gordimer
Ceremony, Leslie Marmon Silko

Brown Girl, Brownstones, Paule Marshall
Housekeeping, Marilynne Robinson
The Bluest Eye and *Song of Solomon*, Toni Morrison
Nervous Conditions, Sandra Cisneros
Runaway (stories), Alice Munro
The Color Purple, Alice Walker
Waiting, Ha Jin
Shizuko's Daughter, Kyoko Mori
The Bird Artist, Howard Norman
The Home Place, Wright Morris

Non-fiction

Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, James Agee
The Home Place, Wright Morris
Preoccupations, Seamus Heaney
A Walker in the City, Alfred Kazin
False Papers, André Aciman
The Place He Made, Edie Clark
Reading Lolita in Tehran, Azar Nafisi
Blue Pastures and *Winter Hours*, Mary Oliver
The Poetics of Space, Gaston Bachelard
Walden, Henry David Thoreau
Staying Put and *Hunting for Hope*, Scott Russell Sanders
Ceremonial Time, John Hanson Mitchell
Weed Time, John Lane
Zoro's Field, Thomas Rain Crowe
Red House, Sarah Messer
Pilgrim at Tinker Creek, Annie Dillard
Summers with Juliet, Bill Roorbach
Memoir of a Cracker Childhood, Janisse Ray
Running in the Family, Michael Ondaatje
Sightlines, Terry Osborne
Life Work, Donald Hall
In Deep: Country Essays, Maxine Kumin
Volcano, Garrett Hongo
Deep Enough for Ivorybills, James Kilgo
Hunting from Home, Christopher Camuto
Earth House Hold, Gary Snyder
Reading, Writing, and Leaving Home, Lynn Freed
Year of Magical Thinking, Joan Didion
Human Landscape, Nazim Hikmet
Your Sun, Manny, Marie Harris
The Man Made of Words, N. Scott Momaday
The Wild Braid, Stanley Kunitz
Refuge, Terry Tempest Williams