



Smithsonian Education

STUDENT WORK

During the 2003 Teen Writers' Workshop, students were prompted by the author, Dr. Norma Cantú, to imagine a photo of themselves when they were younger and to tell the story of the photo. Below are selected student responses to this exercise.

I can remember when I was 7 or maybe eight years old. Standing outside in front of a church which seems to look like it was abandoned. I was in North Carolina with my mother, father sister, brother and church members having revivals. My mother took the picture of me while standing by the van that we traveled in. I could read her lips when she said "Kiki, smile girl." I tried to stall as long as I could to get my position together, until I just put my hands on my hips and put one leg up... standing on my toes. I could hear my mother saying, "you think your grown." I was wearing a sky blue dress with fancy black dress shoes on my feet that glistened in the heat of the mid-summer of North Carolina. My mother dressed my sister and I alike, with different color barrettes in our hair. I could hear the people now saying, "Are they twins?" and just to feel proud she would say yes. As I was getting ready to smile to take the picture, I smoothed my dress down, feeling the silk material of the dress made me feel pretty, free, and comfortable with my appearance. As I smiled the camera flashed, turning my eyes yellow with 30 second blindness. I walked to the church-house where they had a kitchen. Already from outside I could smell the delicious ingredients of the food, all ready to settle in my stomach. If I would ask myself at my age I would ask her, was your life very interesting? And I would say, "Better younger than older and not at all."

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My mom is taking a picture of me when I graduated from Elementary. I am wearing dress clothes and I'm with my friend. My mother is telling me to look at the camera. I can smell the punch and I'm on the stage and I have some brand new leather Timberlands. It [first graduation] is like one step closer to maturing. I would tell him to keep on going.

This is me in my graduation at Harriet Tubman Elementary and I am walking across the stage while my mother says, “M---, look at the camera.” I look at it and she takes the picture. Then I feel good because later on I will have a memory of my first graduation. I also feel nervous because next year I am going to middle school and I don’t know what it will be like.

* * *

He’s at a cookout and he walks outside with corn on the cob in his left hand with his blue and white shorts and T-shirt outfit. As he walks out the door he smells the grill and the grass. It’s cool outside and as he walks to see what’s going on beyond the rail that separates the outside carpet and the patio walkway he hears someone say, “N__” and as he looks up the flash fills his eyes as a smile takes over my face.

As I see this five year old chubby boy I would ask him, “how do you feel?” He would answer, “happy.” I would tell him to enjoy this happiness and not want to be in a hurry to become a teenager. He thinks that when he gets older everything would be okay. But I would tell this child don’t think you won’t be faced with problems that will literally take you through hell. I would tell this child to enjoy his problem free life now because when he gets older this memory, this place is where he goes to escape the trials he faces when a teenager.

In class, students wrote poems emulating poems they had studied and inspired by objects in the museum exhibit. Below is a selection of student writing.

Ethiopia

I am from beautiful handmade dresses,
from women carrying loads on their heads
I am from the beads on my braids
(shiny, making a sound as I move my neck)
I am from the bumpy dirt roads,
the tree houses,
those who live there speaking different languages
I remember
as if I never left them .

I am from milk and necklaces,
from lions and chickens
I am from where you eat together
Work together and live together,
from speak up but never are heard.
I am from a country never taken over by a colonizer.
I am from lie who gave me life
with holy water
and I must serve him forever .

I am from the bright without lights,
from raw meat and homemade coffee.
From the babies my grandmother lost,
to the bullet
my grandfather shot, that almost took her life.
In my drawer I have pictures
to help me recall home
a glimpse of unique faces
to remind me of who I am.
I am from those Ethiopian images.

Emulation of George Ella Lyon's "Where I'm From"

Where I'm From

I am from the city,
from teenage boys and girls.
I am from the sun over the black top.
(where girls play double- dutch and boys are on the court).
I am from ice cream trucks, owned by Mr. Smith, who knows what I
want when he sees me running to the sound of the bell.

I'm from boys with tanktops and white T's
from Eastern Market or Georgetown .
I'm from what goes around
comes around,
from the Mad Chef Cafe to house parties. .
I'm from churches and Liquor Stores
on the same block
and drug dealers down the street.

I'm from boyfriends and girlfriends,
break-ups and make-ups.
From the friend that I lost
to her baby's father's anger.
The funerals that I attend
and the obituaries that I keep
inside a folder to remember those lost.
Old memories in my mind,
loved ones in my heart
to help me appreciate my life .
I am from the great- grandfather-
I lost- the day after I gave him
a big hug and kiss on his 73rd birthday- one of more to come.

Modeled after "Where I'm From" by George Ella Lyon

Where I'm From

I am from music
from bachata, salsa, meringue, cumbia,
I am from the rhythm of this music.
(Loud, yet soothing, it always makes you move.)
I am from the corner stores,
the tradition,
that comes and goes like
ants working, preparing before winter comes.
I am from fruits and riches
 from nothing at all
I am from the say- it -all
and they envy-all
from simpaticos and snobs
I am from he likes me,
 I like him
 and the pick up lines (piropos) they all say.
I am from Pedro and Margarita Juarez tamales and pupusas.
From those who came to the US for a
better life
the long hard hours worked to stay settled
in my closet was a box
with pictures
memories of those gone
forever and now watch over me
I am from that love-
the rejection of those- who don't care
and stepped out, dropped from the family tree.

Emulation of "Where I'm From" by George Ella Lyon

"Where I'm From"

El Rio. Mexico.

Rio Grande/Cultural Identity/ Sustainable Development.

Mestizos/ tanned villagers

working in the heat of ranch life

praying to the Virgin of Guadalupe, as older women, with babies in their arms,

survive in the sweatshops or fincas,

Here, across from the U.S. in El Rio,

Political and social borders

of miles of water,

separate piñata and adobe brick makers.

Here, where we reconstructed economies with technology. Here,

where at 15 years old and maturing,

they asked me to work as a shrimper.

I wonder if will carry on the traditions?

(Emulation of "The Village"
by Luis Rodriguez; inspired,
by the El Rio exhibit, Smithsonian)

Columbia Heights

Columbia Heights. North West DC.

Diversity/poverty/ family

people of color/ poor white residents .

fade in the eyes of corporate government

claiming what's theirs while 14-year old

boys, with bandanas on their heads,

tag their names on their school walls,

here across from the White House,

on the corner,

of under construction condos, the big boxes,

amidst liquor stores and trailers.

Here we claim what's ours, against gentrification,

in our own traditional ways, making papusas and putting on plays in Pigeon Parks.

Here a mother of a boy on the run

joked about me marrying her son.

I carry pictures of the once village

in my head.

Modeled after Luis Rodriguez's "The Village"

El Rio

El Rio. Southwestern U.S. and Mexico.

Brick layers/ Shrimpers/ Pinata Makers

Brown/ native villagers

build their own houses,

not because of lack of technology but lack of toxins,

as kids learn how to shrimp,

with their father by their side,

teaching them to preserve their tradition,

against pollution and development,

women dancing under azure skies at night,

slaving in maquiladoras by day,

they work to have a better living

for themselves and family members,

here, where our houses

are made out of adobe decorated with herbs and chiles.

Here, where if I break this tradition I don't know

what will happen.

I love my village, counting the rosary beads

with prayers for El Rio,

yet will I leave it?

Mimic of "The Village" by Luis Rodriguez