

## Childhood Poem

This poem prompt could be a way to focus on a specific event in your own life. You could also write about an event in the life of your novel's main character. Perhaps your character only just mentions something from her/his past; therefore, you might have to use your imagination and make up some details to add richness to your poem. Some possible subjects could be:

- An early apartment or house you lived in
- A relationship with a grandparent (aunt, uncle, cousin)
- A favorite toy broken
- Some kind of lessons (piano, dance, sports)
- Your best friend
- An old picture book
- An early photograph
- An early sports activity
- Running away from home
- A family gathering
- A scary event

Begin by writing down everything that's even remotely about the subject. Try to put yourself physically in that place. Think of the details perceived through the senses — the smell of the movie house, the voice of the coach, the feel of the broken toy. Write a poem and make the memory so authentic that any reader will be able to experience it.

**Example:**

### Grandmother's Visit by Beth Frost

You walked out of the plane  
Into my room  
And made it your own  
Filled it with yourself —  
The scent of powder,  
The small leather prayer book  
Wrapped in plastic to hold the aging  
Skin, worn and wrinkled.  
I would wake early  
Before the rest were awake  
And know you would be reading.  
I skirted over the cold wood floors  
Held my breath against the stairs' creaks  
And saw the light under the door.  
  
I climbed under your warm blankets  
And listened.

## Dialogue or Two-Voice Poems

From your reading identify dyads of characters, settings or ideas that might argue, discuss or dialogue. Create a discussion between the pair. Let them speak in authentic voices.

Pair with a partner and work together to **create a two-voice poem**. Choose two characters (or concepts) from your book. Improvise a dialogue/argument between these characters. After you get the idea about what the dialogue sounds like, write it in draft form. Without using names, lay it out so that it's clear when the voices change.

**Examples:**

*The Vicar and The Teacher*  
from *I Heard the Owl Call My Name*  
by Maxx Nanson, student

The clouds are a light gray  
the normal but beautiful color of Kingcome sky.

The clouds are ominous and dreary,  
I grow tired of this place.

Rain starts to fall,  
as much a part of me as my own arm:

Rain starts to fall,  
reflecting my somber mood.

The air is cold,  
feeling clean, fresh, and new.

The air is cold  
and I put on my jacket longing for the warm summer days of my old home

Soon the children will visit me,  
so innocent and curious.

Soon the children will visit me,  
I grow tired of their blank, expressionless faces.

I respect the culture,  
and don't force my beliefs.

I am a teacher,  
and they will learn English.

Life in Kingcome is simple,  
it makes a man realize what his place in life is all about.

Life in Kingcome is boring,  
no man should ever have to come here.

I am an outsider, for I can never truly be a part of the  
I am an outsider, for I will never be one of them.

### Ending Poem

by Rosario Morales  
and  
Aurora Levins Morales

I am what I am.  
 A child of the Americas.  
 A light-skinned mestiza of the Caribbean.  
 A child of many diaspora, born into this continent at a crossroads.  
 I am Puerto Rican. I am U.S. American.  
 I am New York Manhattan and the Bronx,  
 A mountain-born, country-bred, homegrown jibara child,  
 up from the shietl, a California Puerto Rican Jew.  
 A product of the New York ghettos I have never known.  
 I am an immigrant.  
 and the daughter and granddaughter of immigrants.  
 We didn't know our forebears' names with a certainty.  
 They aren't written anywhere.  
 First names only or *mija, negra, ne, honey, sugar, dear.*

I come from the dirt where the cane was grown.  
 My people didn't go to dinner parties. They weren't invited.  
 I am caribena, island grown.  
 Spanish is in my flesh, ripples from my tongue, lodges in my hips,  
 the language of garlic and mangoes.  
 Boricua. As Boricuas come from the isle of Manhattan.  
 I am latinoamerica, rooted in the history of my continent.  
 I speak from that body. Just brown and pink and full of drums inside.

I am not African.  
 Africa waters the roots of my tree, but I cannot return.

I am not Taina.  
 I am a late leaf of that ancient tree,  
 and my roots reach into the soil of two Americas.  
 Taino is in me, but there is no way back.

I am not European, though I have dreamt of those cities.  
 Each plate is different.  
 wood, clay, papier maché, metals basketry, a leaf, a coconut shell.  
 Europe lives in me but I have no home there.

### Family Photo or Snapshot Poem

On a sheet of paper list 5 to 7 vivid images from the book you are reading.

- Choose one and circle it.
- Describe everything you see, hear, smell in the image.  
Include color, texture, time of day or night, season and place.
- Notice something that is in the background. Notice what stands out in the foreground.
- Look for items, actions or expressions that suggest more than surface appearance.

What you have just done is like looking at a photograph. Using the idea of a photograph, recreate a "snapshot" that conveys information about a character. Imagine that you are one of the characters looking at this old photograph. Try to reveal changes between **the then** when the image was taken and **the now** when it is being viewed.

### Examples:

**Family Album**  
by Diane Stevenson

<sup>1</sup>  
 A child with only the sun  
 in her eyes, my sister shields her face,  
 hand palm out, as if to say no.

<sup>2</sup>  
 Alone, the garden behind her fragments  
 of color, my mother seems to listen.  
 July, 1947: I am here, too, inside,  
 as yet invisible, though the sun  
 must filter through, like blood, to me.  
 I must be hearing her heart.

<sup>3</sup>  
 At two, I sit in the grass,  
 legs forward, facing the sun.  
 On the lawn in front of me,  
 a dark figure approaches,  
 almost touching my feet.  
 I look up, blink, and my father  
 records himself, a shadow,  
 just out of range.

<sup>4</sup>  
 Florida, 1960. My sister and I kneel,  
 behind us three generations of women.  
 No son's been born for a hundred years.  
 Even the palms are graceful women,  
 and hibiscus opens its wide, red mouth.

**Photograph, 1969**  
by Katy Barber, student

This is my mother  
 lifting her hair long  
 like a low whistle  
 off her neck  
 These are her fingers  
 caught in the tangles  
 of brown and gold caught in  
 silver earrings  
 This is my father  
 reaching through the lens  
 to touch the edge of a new family  
 to touch her opening belly  
 under her full dress

This is existing  
before I exist

This is me growing up  
 against their lives  
 him watching for a sharp  
 breath from her  
 her looking out  
 onto the boarder of birth  
 this is bumping us into three

## Found Poem

As you read a story or a portion of a story, select words or phrases that stand out to you. They could be sensory words (taste, touch, smell, sound, sight), or they could be words that catch your eye ("dazzling," "grumbling," "deadly," "gossamer," "humming," etc.). Write a **LIST** of these words, collecting as many as you can.

From the list of words you have selected, use as many of those words as needed to create a poem that expresses one of the following choices —

- How you felt about what you read
- How a character may feel about who s/he is or what happened to him/her
- How you responded to an important issue brought out in what you read

Put your list of words and phrases apart. Arrange them in any order and spatial pattern desired to create a poem that comes out of what you just read. Remember that in poetry a line may be repeated several times for emphasis and may be as short as one word. This "found poem" creates an overall impression of the reading selection and may bring out a theme, motif or symbol of a particular work as well as the beauty of the language.

**Example**, brainstormed by a class after reading an article about poverty.

A house, luxuries, laughter,  
money and happiness,  
understanding.

Children and pride.  
Clean clothes and  
a good job.

Is it only a dream?

No dishes. No money.  
Flies, worms and poor  
diet. Worn out, tired . . .  
no hope.

Help us.

A red cloud of shame,  
despair, everything destroyed,  
a black future.

Death.

## Just Because... Poem

After reading these example poems, you might write your own "Just Because..." poem, or you might write a "Just Because..." poem using the voice of a character in your reading.

"Just Because..." poems ask you to describe yourself, or your chosen character. Start line one of each stanza, or verse, with the words "Just because I..." and finish with a short statement of something true about you, or the character. The next three lines tell what you (or the character) are NOT or how you would or would not like your readers to respond to who you are. The last line of the poem repeats the first line but ends with a tag directing the reader to do something for you. Try to write at least two or three stanzas.

### Student Examples:

Just because I'm scared

Don't laugh and giggle behind my head  
Don't kid and play when I'm not there  
Still ask me because I might play

Just because I'm scared

it doesn't mean I can't do it  
it doesn't give you the right to talk about me  
it doesn't stop me from having fun

Just because I'm scared

Still tell me everything you did  
Can't wait until I get big

Just because I'm scared — please try to be my friend

— Brandon Womack (Grade 10)

Just because I'm an only child

I'm not a freak  
I'm not shy

Just because I'm an only child

I'm not lonely  
I'm not selfish

I'm not spoiled

Just because I'm an only child

I know I'm not perfect  
I can't always be the best friend  
I'm not a nerd

Just because I'm an only child — let me be me.

— Liz Webster (Grade 9)

## Letter or Epistle Poem

A poem of address may name someone or imply a listener. It may address someone not present. It resembles the conversations we sometimes carry on in our heads, but it is crafted to clearly make a point. It is both intimate and instant — the feeling genuine, but the true audience not necessarily the person addressed since we read the letter-poem. In a way it is like a soliloquy in a play, a monologue.

### Examples:

#### This Is Just to Say

by William Carlos Williams

I have eaten  
the plums  
that were in  
the icebox  
and which  
you were probably  
saving  
for breakfast  
Forgive me  
they were delicious  
so sweet  
and so cold

#### # 5

by Dan Gerber

Another winter morning  
I'm expecting your call  
I stand close to the window and watch  
my breath form a rose on the glass  
I scratch your name on it  
then wipe it away with my sleeve  
listening for your tires  
to crunch through the ice on the drive  
I notice how snow glistens on the pine boughs  
that there's no wind at all  
It's too cold for my walk  
Nothing dares disturb this stillness  
I know you aren't coming  
I press my cheek to the window  
The telephone rings  
My breath forms a rose on the glass

Write **two letter poems** from different characters in the materials you are reading.

#### Prewrite:

- List 3 or 4 times in the story that your character might construct a letter.
- Decide audience. Which character is receiving this letter?

#### Write:

- Have the letter writer draft a note to the addressee. The letter-writer's voice should be true to that character.
- Then begin to work this note into poetry form. Focus on imagery and line breaks.

Repeat this process for the second letter from a different character.

Some ideas for either poem:

- Write a poem in answer to a question you imagine a character asking.
- Write a poem telling the addressee something you (the character) want to say but would have a hard time telling directly.
- Write a poem suggesting some secret connection in a mysterious way.

## List Poem

A list or catalogue poem is simply an itemization of things or events. The catalogue may be embellished, selected or arranged for rhythm and sound. Poet Walt Whitman used lists in many of his poems, as did Allen Ginsburg in *Howl*. Gary Snyder has a set of poems including "Things to Do in Portland." Ted Berrigan uses everyday items in his poems such as "10 Things I Do Every Day."

Using details from the novel you are reading, choose a character (persona) and try a list poem to catalogue "Things to Do in \_\_\_\_\_." Fill in the blank with the place where some or most of your novel occurs. Or, try a list poem entitled "Things I Love about \_\_\_\_\_" (again the place name) or "Things I Did When I Was \_\_\_\_\_" (age of the character whose point of view you're using).

### Example:

#### Things to Do around Portland by Gary Snyder

Go walk along the Sandy when the smelt run  
Drink Buttermilk at the Buttermilk Corner.  
Walking over Hawthorne Bridge the car tires sing  
Take the trolley out to Sellwood when cherries are in bloom.  
Hiking the woods below Council Crest, a treehouse high in a Douglas  
fir near the medical school.  
Bird watching and plant hunting on Sauvie Island in May.  
Vine maple leaves in the slopes above St. John's Bridge in autumn.  
Wading the Columbia out to sandbars  
Himalayan blackberries tangle at the base of steel high-tension Bonneville  
transmission tower  
your fingers stained --  
Get married in Vancouver, without the three-day wait.  
Cash paychecks at the Pastime  
Beer in Ericson's, hamburgers at  
Tic Tock.  
Led down narrow corridors of Court House, City Hall, the newspapers,  
the radios, the jail  
Parking in the Park blocks  
Sunburned skiing  
Shivering at the ocean  
Standing in the rain.

## Metaphor Poem

Create a metaphor / simile that describes / explains one of the main characters in your book. Remember that a metaphor is a comparison between two **unlike** things in which no word of comparison is used. Remember that a simile is a comparison of two **unlike** things in which a word of comparison (**like** or **as**) is used. To create your metaphor,

- Draw the metaphor first.
- Next write a poem, based on your metaphor.

**Examples**, based on students reading The Color Purple.

**Celie**  
by Lila Johnson, student

I am a record  
on your shelf  
the one  
dressed  
in dust and age  
full  
of cracked songs  
you play  
when you are blue  
the one  
pushed  
behind the others  
cool black jackets  
smooth golden sounds  
the one  
your liquor-heavy fingers  
finds  
on days  
your red water eyes  
don't know the difference  
just an old record  
you play me  
when you are blue.

**Celie**  
by Donald Pendleton, student

I am Celie  
I am the cold hard black floor  
everyone walked on  
People stained me  
but I stayed solid under them  
and did not squeak  
I am the floor now but once you go downstairs  
I become the ceiling

**Olinka**  
by Omar Hanson, student

I was the roofleaf plant you killed,  
replaced with rubber.  
I was the village you plowed over,  
replaced with asphalt.  
I was the quiet you destroyed,  
replaced with smoldering bulldozers.  
I was the children playing in the sun,  
chased away, replaced with apathetic workers.  
I was the land stolen, for which you gave nothing,  
replaced with nothing.  
I was the Olinka people.

## Poetry of Place

Place can be a physical landscape, the sweep of the land, the vegetation, waterways, or buildings. It can inform your state of mind, create or reflect feelings, identify your background, ethnicity and even social class. Certain places may hold memories of specific events.

Choose a place that is **important to one of the characters** and create a poem using images and details from the text that **show the place** and that reveal the character's **feeling** for that place.

### Examples:

**Home**  
by Robert Winner

My heart and my bones wince.  
It's so damn sad-looking  
and ugly, the Bronx —  
driving past those small hills  
blighted for miles with bleak  
six-story desert-like apartment  
buildings—the landscape I come from.  
It's so damn ugly in its torment  
of knifings and fires. I forget  
I was happy there sometimes  
in its damp and dingy streets, living my life  
with the five continents of the world  
in my mind's eye.

Maybe it was beautiful before us:  
the coast with no landfill  
a blurred peninsula of swamps and forests,  
a wilderness that became another wilderness  
—beds and linoleum, school books,  
musty hallways, laughter, despondency—  
unremembering earth, a riverbed  
millions flowed on, clinging briefly  
to some masonry, then gone . . .

**The Tropics in New York**  
by Claude McKay

Bananas ripe and green, and gingerroot  
Cocoa in pods and alligator pears,  
And tangerines and mangoes and grapefruit,  
Fit for the highest prize at parish fairs.  
Set in the window, bringing memories  
Of fruit trees laden by low-singing hills  
And dewy dawns, and mystical blue skies  
In benediction over nun-like hills.

My eyes grew dim, and I could no more gaze;  
A wave of longing through my body swept,  
And, hungry for the old, familiar ways,  
I turned aside and bowed my head and wept.

**The 1st**  
by Lucille Clifton

What I remember about that day  
is boxes stacked across the walk  
and couch springs curling through the air  
and drawers and tables balanced on the curb  
and us, hollering,  
leaping up and around  
happy to have a playground;

nothing about the emptied rooms  
nothing about the emptied family

## Pop\* Lyrics Poem

Imagine you are one of the characters in the story you read, perhaps even one of the "supporting" characters — someone whose opinions, thoughts and feelings might not have come out very often or clearly.

Transport your chosen character into modern times and imagine that s/he is riding in a car, or walking in a store, or listening to the radio somewhere. A song comes on . . . The character picks up the words of the song and starts to think, to remember. The character's thoughts drift away to . . . memories, images — strong images. Write down those thoughts of the character. The character would let them weave and dip, listening to the verses of the song, then remembering again, reflecting, seeing, feeling.

After you've written down the character's reflections, create a poem with them. Put part of the song lyrics on the left side of your paper and the character's poem on the right.

### Example:

In Ricochet River, a novel by Oregon writer Robin Cody, the 18-year-old son leaves home at the end of high school for college. This is what came up for his mother as the radio played a Whitney Houston song.

### I Will Always Love You by Dolly Parton

If I should stay,  
I would only be in your way.  
So I'll go, but I know  
I'll think of you  
Every step of the way,  
.....  
.....memories  
.....

That is all I'm taking with me,  
.....  
.....  
.....

I hope life treats you kind,  
And I hope you have all you dreamed of,  
And I wish you joy and happiness.  
But above all this,  
I wish you love,  
.....  
.....

And I will always love you . . .  
I will always love you . . .  
I will always love you . . .

\* Any recent song in any form of music is fine as long as the language is appropriate to the classroom, especially the classroom walls where your writing will be displayed. Pop does not mean "Top 40." Pop means popular with your character.

## Random Autobiography Poem

Today we're making lists of things we've done in our lives. Lists are the building blocks of poetry, and from these lists, we will write autobiographical poems.

- List the names of towns and states you've visited or lived in. Put a note about what you saw or did there.
- List animals you've touched or petted. When? Where? What did it feel like?
- List the historic events you've witnessed. These can be neighborhood, city, state, national or world events.
- List things you've lost — including people, animals and "baby bracelets."
- List some odd things you've experienced — like eating a spider or kissing a frog.
- List places where you shopped and things that you bought.
- List just a few favorites — a piece of music, a color, a smell, a specific flower, whatever comes to mind.

Combining some of the opening lines below as "starter dough" with ideas in your lists, write and shape a poem about yourself.

- I was the expected (or unexpected) • I learned
- I've held • I've heard
- I lost • I've had some
- I tell you sincerely • I saw
- I once screamed • I once
- Twice • And only one
- And twice • I have
- I bought • I will testify
- I've been scared • I have stories
- The smell of • I have shopped
- I love • Now I
- I'm • I found

And naturally, we will read these out loud.

**Examples:**

**Random Autobiography**  
by Greg Birnbaum, student

I have been to India  
where I saw wild monkeys  
climb big trees.  
I have been to Yellowstone  
where I saw buffalo follow  
my footsteps.  
I have touched dogs that bite  
and snakes that kill.  
  
I have lost trust and respect.  
I have lost friends and family.  
I have found hope and dreams.  
I have found knowledge and wisdom.

I have seen the sun set from  
Bull Mountain in Montana.  
I was the expected killer  
in the game of Clue.

I've held a first born baby  
in my hands,  
then I gave her back to my sister.

I've heard rock and rap,  
oldies and new age.  
I've been mean to my friends,  
and then said, "I'm sorry."

I saw myself with a gun,  
but didn't like the control,  
and put it down.

I once gave advice to a friend  
but got yelled at because  
it wasn't what she wanted to hear.

I've driven through a rain storm  
with my mother,  
sick,  
in the passenger seat.

Twice I lost my house keys,  
only I found them hours later.

And only once have I been in love,  
but now it's over,  
and I'm not sure if I even was.

**Timely Advice Poem**

Read the example of an advice poem below. Then chose an important character from the book you are reading and give that character several pieces of advice about how to live his or her life. If you have trouble getting started, then try using the first two words of McBride's poem.

**A Little Bit of Timely Advice**  
by Mekeel McBride

Time you  
put on blue shoes, high-  
heeled, sequined, took  
yourself out  
dancing.

You been  
spending too  
much time crying  
salty dead-fish  
lakes into  
soup spoons.

holding  
look-alike  
contests with doom. Baby,  
you need to be moving. Ruin  
ruins itself, no  
use unplanning

your garden.  
Crank up the old  
radio into lion-looking-  
for-food music; or harmonica  
all indigo fanning  
up sunrise.

you say  
you got no  
makings for a song?  
Sing anyway. Best  
music's the stuff comes  
rising out of nothing.

**Pokeberries**  
by Ruth Stone

I started out in the Virginia mountains  
with my grandmother's pansy bed  
and my Aunt Maud's dandelion wine.  
We lived on greens and back-fat and biscuits.  
My Aunt Maud scrubbed right through the linoleum.  
My daddy was a northerner who played drums  
and chewed tobacco and gambled.  
He married my mama on the rebound.  
Who would want an ignorant girl with red hair?  
They took a Pullman up to Indianapolis  
and someone stole my daddy's wallet.  
My whole life has been stained with pokeberries.  
No man seemed right for me. I was awkward  
until I found a good wood-burning stove.  
There is no use asking what it means.  
With my first piece of ready cash I bought my own  
place in Vermont; kerosene lamps, dirt road.  
I'm sticking here like a porcupine up a tree.  
Like the one our neighbor shot. Its bones and skin  
hung there for three years in the orchard.  
No amount of knowledge can shake my grandma out of me;  
or my Aunt Maud; or my mama, who didn't just bite an apple  
with her big white teeth. She split it in two.