Poems about Family

A Multicultural Collection
Selected and Illustrated by Alison Keller
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When given the task of creating a poetry collection that honors diversity, I was clueless about where to begin, so I went to my bookshelf. I started with the anthologies that I own, looking for clues that a poem or poet was diverse. I looked at names, some of them I recognized and other I didn’t. I looked at titles and content of poems, searching for experiences and details of diverse cultures. I looked up additional poets, looked into their backgrounds and cultures. Then, realizing that my library lacked diverse poetry, I spent time researching new books to purchase. I thought about various cultural groups I wanted represented in my collection: Native American, Asian, African American, Latino/a, Special Needs, GLBTQ, Arab and Middle Eastern and those from countries other than the United States. I wanted the voices of both men and women. I looked in articles and textbooks for recommendations, read reviews (such as those on oyate.org) and ordered some books.

As the books arrived, I read through each one carefully, noting the poems I enjoyed most, recording themes and what the poems had in common. I looked for poems that would reach children, that had universal themes, and that had provided an opportunity for discussion about diversity and implementation of critical literacy skills.

Looking back through the ones I had marked, I noticed that most of my favorites were about relationships, specifically those between family members. I know that these poems were important to me personally because my relationships with people I care about are what make me feel the most. Hearing or reading a poem that strikes a chord and makes me think of my own relationships or family memories is an emotive experience. I think the same is true for others, family is something we know about and feel about, and we can all relate in some way to poems about family. When thinking about people different from us, it is important to celebrate the differences, but also recognize the common ground. In this collection, family is the common ground and point of entry for a deeper understanding and discussion of diversity.

I hope you enjoy this collection,

Alison Keller
Poems About Family
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“Mother to Son” 6
By Langston Hughes
About the Poet: Hughes is a notable African American poet.

“With My Father” 7
By Kobayashi Issa
About the Poet: Issa is a well-known poet from Japan, famous for his haikus, he wrote in the eighteenth century.

“Sunday” 8
By B. Vincent Hernandez
About the Poet: Hernandez is a gay poet. In a statement about this poem he says, “‘Sunday’ represents just one possibility for the roles men and women play…”

“Dusting” 9
By Julia Alvarez
About the Poet: Alvarez was born in New York to Dominican parents, and was raised in the Dominican Republic.

“A Pearl” 10
By Fawziyya Abu Khalid
Translated by Salwa Jabsheh and John Heath-Stubbs
About the Poet: Khalid is from Saudi Arabia.

“Blood” 11
By Naomi Shihab Nye
From: Claiming the Spirit Within A Sourcebook of Women's Poetry
About the Poet: Nye’s father is Palestinian and she spent time growing up in Israel.

“My Bird Day” 12
By Janet S. Wong
From: Good Luck Gold and Other Poems. New York: Margaret K. Elderly, 1994. pg. 2
About the Poet: Born in L.A., Janet S. Wong’s has a Chinese father and a Korean mother.
“Lard for Moisturizer” 13
By Ofelia Zepeda
About the Poet: Ofelia Zepeda’s family is Tohono O’odham and her poems focus on life for her people in the desert.

“Knoxville, Tennessee” 14
By Nikki Giovanni
About the Poet: Nikki Giovanni is a well-known African American writer and poet.

“Grandpa Milking Cows” 15
By Monica Gunning
From: Not A Copper Penny in me House. Pennsylvania: Wordsong, 1993. pg. 14,
About the Poet: Monica Gunning was born in Jamaica and moved to the US early in her life.

“Translating Grandfathers House” 16
By E.J. Vega
About the Poet: EJ Vega has a Cuban heritage.

“My Great Grand Uncle” 17
By Tarapada Ray
About the Poet: Ray is a Bengali poet and lives in India.

“Brownout” 18
By Tony Perez
About the Poet: Perez is a poet who lives in the Philippines.

“Initiation” 19
By Craig Romenka
About the Poet: Craig Romenka is a young man with autism and cerebral palsy.

“Iris” 20
By William Carlos Williams
About the Poet: Williams was born to an English father and Puerto Rican mother.
A Brief Note About the Books I Used and Recommend

Cool Salsa
- An anthology of poems by various authors with Hispanic heritage, most of the poems are included in both English and Spanish.

Embracing the Sky
- A collection of poems by a young man with autism and cerebral palsy about his experiences.

Good Luck Gold and Other Poems
- A collection of poems about the experience of growing up in America with Korean and Chinese parents, by Janet S. Wong.

I Feel a Little Jumpy Around You
- An anthology of poems paired around a theme, one in each pair is

Not A Copper Penny in Me House
- A collection of poetry by Monica Gunning about growing up in the Caribbean.

Ocean Power
- A collection of poems by a Native American woman about relationships with people and the Earth.

Poetry for Young People
- A series of poetry books that takes poets usually seen as writing for adult audiences, and chooses the poems that children can relate to.

Sing a Song of Popcorn
- A children’s anthology with a wide range of poems and poets.

This Same Sky
- An anthology edited by Naomi Shihab Nye with poems by poets from all around the world.
Mother to Son
Langston Hughes

Well, son, I'll tell you:
Life for me ain't been no crystal stair.
It's had its tacks in it,
And splinters,
And boards torn up,
And places with no carpet on the floor,
Bare.
But all the time
I'se been a-climbin' on,
And reachin' landin's
And turnin' corners,
And sometimes goin' in the dark
Where there ain't been no light.
So boy, don't you turn back.
Don't you set down on the steps
'Cause you finds it's kinder hard.
Don't you fall now -
For I'se still goin', honey,
I'se still climbin',
And life for me ain't been no crystal stair.
With My Father
Kobayashi Issa

With my father
I would watch dawn
over green fields.
Sunday
B. Vincent Hernandez

Sunday morning
while the Earth
arches below the sun

Mother washes dinner dishes
clanging silvers spoons
as father pulls
nickels from our ears

There is really magic
in my head
and the ringing of silver
reminds me of
ice cream trucks
in the summer

Mother demands
that we stop these games
and calls our father
a fool.
Dusting
Julia Alvarez

Each morning I wrote my name on the dusty cabinet, then crossed the dining table in script, scrawled in capitals on the backs of chairs, practicing signatures like scales while Mother followed, squirting linseed from a burping can into a crumpled-up flannel.

She erased my fingerprints from the bookshelf and rocker, polished mirrors on the desk scribbled with my alphabets. My name was swallowed in the towel with which she jeweled the table tops. The grain surfaced in the oak and the pine grew luminous. But I refused with every mark to be like her, anonymous.
A Pearl
Fawziyya Abu Khalid

This pearl
was a gift of my grandmother - that great lady -
to my mother
and my mother gave it to me
And now I hand it to you
The three of you and this pearl
Have in common
simplicity and truth
I give it with my love
and with the fullness of heart
you excel in
The girls of Arabia will soon grow
to full stature
The will look about you and say
"She has passed by this road"
and point to the place of sunrise
and the heart's direction.
Blood
Naomi Shihab Nye

"A true Arab knows how to catch a fly in his hands," my father would say. And he'd prove it, cupping the buzzer instantly while the host with the swatter stared.

In the spring our palms peeled like snakes. True Arabs believed watermelon could heal fifty ways. I changed these to fit the occasion.

Years before, a girl knocked, wanted to see the Arab. I said we didn't have one. After that, my father told me who he was, "Shiib" - "shooting star" - a good name, borrowed from the sky. Once, I said, "When we die we give it back?" He said that's what a true Arab would say.

Today the headlines clot in my blood. A little Palestinian dangles a truck on the front page. Homeless fig, this tragedy with a terrible root is too big for us. What flag can we wave? I wave the flag of stone and seed, table mat stitched in blue.

I call my father, we talk around the news. It is too much for him, neither of his two languages can reach it. I drive into the country to find sheep, cows, to please with the air. Who calls anyone Civilized? Where can the crying heart graze? What does a true Arab do now?
My Bird Day
Janet S. Wong

When my grandfather says *birthday* in his Chinese accent, it sound like "bird day," which is closer to truth – four us, anyway.

At my birthday parties we never have paper streamers, piñatas in trees, balloons taped up on the wall. We decorate with platters of Peking duck, soy sauce chicken and squab in lettuce cups. Food is all That matters.

Other Chinese families might do things differently, but my grandfather, whose name is Duck, thinks it's good luck to make a bird day special.
Lard for Moisturizer
Ofelia Zepeda

I turn the vertical blinds, 
attempting to capture the southern light. 
The sun is now at the south corner. 
The December wind is cold, 
magnifying the weakness of the sun’s light. 
This light is difficult to contrast 
to the searing, still heat of three months ago. 
I think of that heat now, but I can’t really remember it. 
I welcome the gentle warmth of the winter sun. 
With this sunlight I think of home and the activity that moves to the east 
side of the house, 
to catch the weak winter morning sun. 
My father sits on that side for hours doing small repairs, 
My mother and her washtubs move to that side also. 
Bent over her washers of clothes, her back to the sun. 
Arms moving back and forth washing, pulling on the rays of the sun. 
My sisters and I hang out clothes, 
being grateful only that it isn’t raining. 
Sun and winter wind dry the clothes quickly. 
The only casualty of this work is our hands. 
Hot water, cold water rinse, cold wind, and mild dry sun. 
As outdoor people our parents 
found small relief in lotions and moisturizers for the skin. 
Our family kept the Jergens lotion people in business, we used to say. 
Early in December moisturizing lotions were fine, but by January and 
February we were ready for the hard stuff, petroleum jelly. 
Our parents went to bed each night with a slight sheen of grease on their 
hands and face. 
We did the same. 
A minor epidermal comfort. 
My sisters and I laugh about one aunt who doesn’t even bother with 
moisturizing lotion or even petroleum jelly, she goes straight for lard. 
We’ve all seen her do this. 
When she makes tortilla dough with the last step she greases each ball of dough. 
As she finishes, any lard left over she simply rubs into her hands as she would lotion. 
My sister mimics and exaggerates the description, showing us how she rubs the lard on her face, arms, and then lifts her skirt and rubs a healthy handful on her brown, chapped knees.
Knoxville, Tennessee
Nikki Giovanni

I always like summer best
you can eat fresh corn from daddy's garden
and okra
and greens
and cabbage
and lots of barbecue
and buttermilk
and homemade ice-cream
at the church picnic

and listen to gospel music
outside
at the church homecoming
and go to the mountains with your grandmother
and go barefooted
and be warm
all the time
not only when you go to bed
and sleep
Grandpa Milking Cows
Monica Gunnings

I'm off to the paddock,
running barefoot in the dew
with my Grandpa.

Grandpa pulling on the udders
fills his pail
with foaming milk.

Sipping warm milk,
I get a white mustache
just like Grandpa's.
Translating Grandfathers House
E.J. Vega

According to my sketch,
Rows of lemon & mango
Trees frame the courtyard
Of Grandfather's stone
And clapboard home;
The shadow of a palomino
Gallops on the lip
Of the horizon.

The teacher says
The house is from
Some Zorro
Movie I've seen.

"Ask my mom," I protest.
"She was born there--
Right there on the second floor.

Crossing her arms she moves on.

Memories once certain as rivets
Become confused as awakenings
In strange places and I question
The house, the horse, the wrens
Perched on the slate roof—
The roof Oscar Jartin
Tumbled from one hot Tuesday,
Installing a new weather vane;
(He broke a shin and two fingers).
Classmates finish drawings of New York City
Housing projects on Navy Street,
I draw one too, with weeds
Rising from sidewalk cracks like windows.
In big round letters I title it:

GRANDFATHER'S HOUSE

Beaming, the teacher scrawls
An A+ in the corner and tapes
It to the green blackboard.

To the green blackboard.
Traduciendo la casa de mi abuelo

En mi dibujo,
Árboles de limón y mango
Enmarcan el patio
De la casa de Madera y piedra
De mi abuelo;
La sombra de un palomino
Galopa sobre el labio
Del horizonte.

La maestra dice que
La casa es de
Algunas películas del
Zorro que he visto.

"Pregúntele a mi mamá," protesto.
"Ella nació ahí—
Ahi mismo en el segundo piso!"

Con los brazos cruzados, ella sigue.

Recuerdos que fueron una vez tan seguros como remaches
Se confunden con despertares
En sitios extraños y cuestiones.
La casa, el caballo, los reyezuelos
Pasos encima del techo de pizarra—
El techo del cual Oscar Jartín
Se cayó un martes caluroso
Mientras trataba de intalar una releta nueva;
(Se quebró la espinilla y dos dedos).
Mis computadores de clase terminan sus dibujos de Nueva York,
Viviendas populares en la calle Navy,
Yo también dibujo uno, con hierbas silvestres
Que crecen en las verdes y redondas lo título:

LA CASA DE MI ABUELO

Radiante, la muestra garabatea
Una A+ en el margen y lo pega
En la pizarra verde.

En la pizarra verde.
My Great Grand Uncle
Tarapada Ray

My great grand uncle had a peculiar hobby
He used to collect the feather
 of different kinds of birds
 of different colours, from different places
His bedroom, corridor and staircase
Were full of thousands of colourful, colourless feathers.

On the day of his death
Just before sunrise, at dawn,
My great grand uncle
 went to the rooftop of his house
And threw the feathers into the morning air,
The feathers floated in the golden rays
 of the rising sun.
Some of the feathers dropped near.
Some went far,
Some floated towards eternity, the sky,

No, it is not possible to write a story
on this subject
But some feathers are still floating
in the sky.
Brownout
Tony Perez

Rather unexpectedly, the lights went out
In the middle of my cousin's story.
He stopped talking,
All around us paralyzed
And we sat still, slighted,
Wanting the dark to explain its intrusion,
I rose and switched the flashlight on,
Detesting its strange brightness.
The room looked different this way, I said,
Showing up shadows which were not there before.
But my cousin said nothing, he turned to me
And stared - he, too, looked different,
And continued his story - it was different, too.
I shut off the light and all was still again.
We lay patiently in bed,
Waiting in the dark, wondering
What would happen next.
Initiation
Craig Romkena

Growing didn’t stop them from trying to understand this strange older brother they inherited, normal to them at first normal, as hours of therapy unfolded before their infant eyes, a motley parade of people, hands that moved, swung, rolled, stroked, voices that read countless books, sung crazy songs, all reaching out to me, my sisters, my brother. When did they realize that other families didn’t have an automatic playgroup, a gymnasium in the basement, and tutors coming every night? Was it the first Saturday at a friend’s house when nobody rocked himself, or talked to himself, or the first time somebody said, “Your brother’s a retard,” and they didn’t know how to answer? Sometimes they grumble, But look beyond embarrassments, And wish with me that the autism would be over. We form bridges into each other’s lives and find out we aren’t so different after all.
Iris
William Carlos Williams

a burst of iris so that
come down for
breakfast

we searched through the
rooms for
that

sweetest odor and at
first could not
find its

source then a blue as
of the sea
struck

startling us from among
those trumpeting
petals