Where I Come From

SUMMARY

People are shaped by where they come from. Their personalities reflect their native environments, whether they're from the jungle or the mountains. They might have an ease or elegance that comes from living in the tropics, or a cool stare that comes from living by the sea. A city background, though totally different, also emanates from people—like the smell of air pollution, or the almost imperceptible smell of springtime tulips; or the way cities parcel nature into neat squares with fountains in the middle; or that smell of museums, where art is also organized into neat blocks (complete with guidebook); or the smell of industry, as in glue factories or shiny metallic offices; or the smell of packed metro trains at rush hour.

Where I'm from, people never forget the woods with their vast swaths of pine trees. The blueberries growing in fire-scarred underbrush. Old wooden farmhouses whose paint is wearing off, and farmyards with hens and chickens wandering around, clucking without purpose. Rundown school buildings with bright purple flowers blooming behind them. Here, winter and spring are the mind's two main moods: the icy season, and the season when the ice thaws.

Suddenly a door opens in my mind, and a cold winter wind rushes in from snowy fields.

THEMES

PLACE AND IDENTITY

Elizabeth Brewster's "Where I Come From" argues that "People are made of places"—that is, where people come from shapes them for the rest of their lives. This effect doesn't always manifest itself in obvious ways. People might only show "hints" of the place that they come from, such as a certain look in their eyes or a set of vivid memories they carry with them. But environments as varied as jungle, mountain, coast, and city all express themselves through the people connected to them. In fact, no matter where people go, they can't escape these roots: their native environment lingers with them like an indelible "smell" or aura.

To the speaker, our environments are more than just a background—they're part of the process that forms us as people. It doesn't matter "how different" these places are: people retain "hints" of their native environments no matter where life takes them. For example, experiencing beautiful tropical weather on a regular basis might encourage more outdoor activity, which in turn builds athleticism and "grace." Even the "[a]tmosphere of cities," often seen as vast and anonymous, forges this link between identity and place. It might be a simple smell—whether of "smog," "factories," or "subways"—that stays with someone from the city, but in some subtle way, it'll shape them forever.

To illustrate their point further, the speaker describes how place has shaped *their* identity. They come from a rural environment—perhaps the New Brunswick of Brewster's own childhood—which often recreates itself in their mind/memory. The speaker, and others from the same place, "carry woods in their minds": that is, the woods never leave them, even if they leave the woods. Their relationship with that environment is permanent. Rundown farms and schoolhouses, "aimless[] chickens," blueberries growing from burned-out brush—all have left their psychological mark as well. Perhaps they manifest themselves as a lasting love of rural life, or a sense of hard luck, aimlessness, or stubborn endurance. The effects may vary, but they can't be avoided altogether.

From time to time, "A door in the [speaker's] mind blows open" and seems to lead them right back to their wintry native landscape. When this happens, it's as if a "frosty wind from fields of snow" suddenly kicks up. Sensory experiences that may once have seemed trivial (e.g., shivering in cold weather) turn out to be vividly embedded in the speaker's psyche. And the "frosti[ness]" could also be metaphorical: an emotional detachment or stoicism, perhaps. Places "make" people in a range of ways, but they never leave us entirely.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-21

NATURAL CYCLES AND MOOD CYCLES

In the second half of "Where I Come From," the speaker uses details from their own environment to sketch a portrait of life in rural and wild spaces. The portrait is far from idyllic: it includes references to decay, "aimless[ness]," and survival under harsh conditions. At the same time, it includes elements of stubborn endurance, beauty, and renewal. The poem implies that the speaker and "people" like her have similar elements in their own psyches: for example, they tend to remain resilient through cyclical ups and downs, bouncing back even from hardship, depression, or exhaustion. Moreover, the poem suggests that this psychology is an inherent part of living close to nature: moods fluctuate along with nature and the seasons, especially in places that cycle through seasonal extremes.

For people living in rural/wild places, the speaker claims, the

features of the mind mirror the features of the landscape and weather. For example, the speaker and others from their area "carry woods in their minds." This might indicate any number of things: a lasting kinship with the natural world, a feeling of secretiveness or anonymity (since woods are shadowy), or even a tendency toward dark moods or thoughts.

Later, the speaker claims that, in their native environment, "Spring and winter / are the mind's chief seasons: ice and the breaking of ice." The polarized nature of the seasons, in other words, causes polarized moods. Like the environment, individuals here tend to go through periods of emotional chilliness, introversion, and/or depression, which eventually turn back to warmth and openness, like the "breaking of ice."

Living in this setting, the speaker suggests, requires a determination to survive through both environmental and emotional extremes. Symbolically, details like the "blueberry patches in the burned-out bush" and the "battered schoolhouses / behind which violets grow" evoke a stubborn resilience and renewal under harsh conditions. Life "batter[s]" and sometimes even burns out people living in such places, but they soldier on regardless.

The deteriorating farms, "aimless[] chickens," and so on mark the speaker's psyche as well. Rural life forces people to accept a certain degree of mess and sprawl (the opposite of those tidy city squares in the first stanza). This attitude, in turn, breeds a hard-won, often wild kind of strength and beauty—like those violets growing behind the rundown schoolhouse.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 12-21

RURAL VS. URBAN LIFE

"Where I come from" contrasts two starkly different environments: the city and the countryside. The speaker shows how both have distinct ways of treating nature—the former taming and restricting it into neat little squares, the latter letting it grow wild. The city imposes more structure, whereas the countryside is freer and less polished. And the city treats people in much the same way, the poem implies, regimenting and repressing life in a way the countryside doesn't.

Unlike the rural setting where the speaker comes from, the big city imposes its authority and control on the environment. For example, the "smell of smog" (and other city aromas) almost completely covers the delicate smell of tulips. More generally, the city tames and limits nature, "tidily plott[ing]" it "with a guidebook" and organizing it into little squares.

These details reflect a wider pattern: the urban environment tries to control its inhabitants, too. In a city, everything has its permitted place. Museums display art, which, like nature, is "tidily plotted." The city prohibits—or tries to prohibit—spontaneity and wildness. Factories and transport systems orchestrate people's lives, defining where they go and *when* they go.

Rural environments, like the one the speaker's from, are more rustic, free, and perhaps even haphazard. The poem doesn't necessarily argue in favor of one environment or the other, but it demonstrates their vast difference. Where the speaker's from, for instance, farmhouses and schoolhouses fall into disrepair. Hens and chickens wander "aimlessly" around yards. Flowers and blueberries grow in unpredictable places. In other words, there's less of a plan, less pressure to harness every inch of ground for a prescribed purpose. Again, the poem isn't claiming this mode of life is better or worse—it's just utterly different from the city, to the point where it produces very different kinds of people.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-19

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-3

People are made ...
... eyes of sea-gazers.

"Where I Come From" starts with a clear statement of its core idea: "People are made of places." In other words, the place where someone "Come[s] From" isn't just an incidental part of their history. It defines and shapes them, and it never leaves them, no matter how far they travel. The alliteration between "People" and "places" binds these two words together, underscoring how inseparable place and identity are.

Metaphorically, people "carry with them" these "hints" of where they're from—these little clues or signals, which aren't always especially obvious. Environments as varied as "jungles or mountains" show up in the personalities of their inhabitants. For example, a tropical place (somewhere with consistently warm weather) might grant someone "a tropic grace." This might mean a physical grace or an easygoing, relaxed character or way of being. (It's easier to become both relaxed and athletic in climates that are sunny, beautiful, and friendly to outdoor activities.)

In a similar way, "sea-gazers" might look at the world with "cool eyes." The cool temperature of the sea and sea-breeze might change how coastal people view life, limiting the sunny optimism that warmer places encourage. The sea is also a kind of paradox, always changing yet always the same, so staring at it might give coastal people a "cool," detached wisdom about the nature of existence.

The speaker doesn't tell the reader precisely *how* such places make people. The poem is more of an invitation to consider the idea—including how it applies to them and people they know.

LINES 3-7

Atmosphere of cities ...
... in the centre;

After the caesura following "sea-gazers" in line 3, the poem changes tack. The opening lines mentioned a variety of places, but they were all natural environments: jungle, mountain, tropics, and coastline. Here and for the rest of the stanza, the speaker focuses on built-up urban environments. The point is the same: where you're from makes you who you are. Now, however, the poem subtly teases out differences between the city and other environments.

The atmosphere of cities, though massively "different" from jungles and the like, still shows up in people's character, memories, and lifestyles. It "drops" from them, or emanates from them, like an aura or scent. In fact, much of the rest of the stanza uses olfactory—smell-based—imagery to describe how the city might stay with someone. It does this in vague, almost dreamy terms; the speaker never spells out *exactly* how a smell might make someone who they are, perhaps because they don't believe they have all the answers. But the effect is no less powerful for being intangible.

The "smell of smog," for example, might be a formative part of someone's urban life. Notice how that hissing /s/ alliteration ("smell of smog") makes the smell seem faintly overbearing and unpleasant. By contrast, the smell of city "tulips in the spring" is so overpowered by other odors (like smog) that it's nearly undetectable: an "almost-not-smell." But even that experience—of being only *just* able to smell the flowers—subtly shapes people's lives. For example, it might encourage them to find and appreciate beauty in unlikely places.

In general, cities—and those who run them—try to tame nature. Everything in a city has its prescribed zone, leaving little room for wildness or unpredictability. Nature is "tidily plotted in little squares / with a fountain in the centre." It's always regulated and monitored, given its small portion of land but no more. (The poem later contrasts this regularity with a more unruly natural environment.) City dwellers might have a similarly regulated relationship with nature, using it as a kind of escape once in a while rather than maintaining a deep, daily connection to it.

LINES 7-11

museum smell, ...
... at rush hours.

The speaker continues describing a city environment, mostly through olfactory imagery. The speaker, who comes from a small rural town (as revealed in the following stanza), imagines the kind of experiences that might be formative for someone from the city.

First of these is a "museum smell." The speaker doesn't go into detail on this smell, but, in a way, that's the point. Museum-going city dwellers can conjure up exactly what that fragrance is like (at least, in their local museum). The phrase is suggestive enough as is without further explanation, and it gets at the singular, ineffable quality certain places have.

Next, there's the fact that art, like nature, is "tidily plotted" in the city (line 8). That is, it's drained of spontaneity, arranged in museums for tourists to browse with the help of "guidebook[s]." In general, urban planners seek to control what happens within the city's borders, marking out spaces for specific purposes rather than letting humanity and nature range freely. The repetition of "tidily plotted" (the phrase also appears in line 6) mirrors the repetitiveness of the city environment—for example, the way it's gridded into monotonous squares.

Lines 9-11 list other city experiences that, over time, might help shape someone's identity. There's the "smell of work, glue factories maybe," a marker of the industrial activity that often takes place in urban environments. (If you grew up next to such a factory, the smell of glue might take you back there every time!) The speaker also mentions "chromium-plated offices" and the "smell of subways / crowded at rush hours": evidence of the commuters and white-collar workers who tend to fill cities as well. Alliteration accentuates the phrase "smell of subways," subtly conveying the intensity of that rush-hour odor. (Compare "smell of smog" in line 4.)

This deep dive into the urban world sets up the next stanza, which juxtaposes the city with the speaker's rural hometown. Notice, though, that the poem doesn't openly criticize the city. True, the speaker seems a little wary of all the smells, as well as the tameness and "tidi[ness]" of urban planning. But these are mainly sketch-like observations, illustrating the various ways cities might impress themselves on people's sense of self.

LINES 12-14

Where I come ...
... the burned-out bush;

In the second stanza, the speaker talks specifically about where they come from. Having offered examples of how various places—particularly cities—might shape identity, the speaker now discusses how their rural hometown has shaped theirs. The sudden use of the first-person pronoun—"Where I come from"—signals this change of direction.

The speaker has two main aims throughout this stanza:

1. To support and expand on the poem's opening statement that "People are made of places."
2. To draw out differences between the city and the countryside.

In just a few finely-sketched details, the poem gives the reader an evocative sense of the speaker's hometown or region.

Though no geographical setting is specified, this stanza most likely describes the landscape of New Brunswick, the Canadian province where Brewster herself comes from. (It's a place she mentioned often in her writing.)

"Where I come from," according to the speaker, "people / carry woods in their minds, acres of pine woods." Growing up around pine forests ensures these trees always stay present in the mind: they leave a deep impression. These "woods" might also come with some symbolism attached: for example, they might represent shadowy, secretive regions of the psyche or emotions.

Line 14 adds further visual imagery: "blueberry patches in the burned-out bush." As with the imagery in the first stanza, the speaker offers very little explanation here. How does the sight of these blueberries affect the speaker now? Why is the bush "burned-out"—from the sun? a fire? (Blueberry bushes are sometimes purposely cleared with controlled fires to promote new growth.) The poem's openness to interpretation perhaps suggests that "People are made of places" in idiosyncratic ways—that is, no two are "made" alike, even if they come from the same area.

Again, this detail might be read symbolically as well. Perhaps the vivid blueberries, growing out of fire-scarred brush, represent a kind of hard-won beauty or survival. Indeed, much of the imagery in this stanza suggests nature's stubborn determination to thrive under harsh conditions. By extension, the *people* who live here might be forced to survive and flourish under difficult circumstances.

Note how alliteration (and consonance) brings line 14 to life:

> blueberry patches in the burned-out bush;

Those plosive /b/ sounds jump out at the reader like little shocks of blue against an otherwise gray, "burned-out" landscape.

LINES 15-19

wooden farmhouses, old, ...
... breaking of ice.

From line 15 through the caesura in line 18 ("with yards [...] which violets grow"), the speaker describes their region in greater detail. It's a rural environment in which life seems unhurried, perhaps even lacking in clear purpose. In other words, it's nothing like the fast-paced, highly regulated "cities" described in the first stanza.

For example, the speaker's region contains "wooden farmhouses, old, in need of paint." These suggest the presence of a farming industry, presumably long-running and multi-generational ("old"). But the fact that the houses need "paint" is a little ambiguous. Do aesthetics in this small town matter less than they might in a glittering city, or does the lack of paint suggest neglect? Is the farming industry in decline here? The poem intentionally holds back from answering questions like these.

The image of "hens and chickens circl[ing] about / clucking aimlessly" might symbolize a more general lack of purpose. Perhaps this town and region are adrift (e.g., due to economic decline). Again, however, that's only one way of reading the image; the speaker isn't prescriptive.

Like the farmhouses, the town's "schoolhouses" have seen better days. They're "battered," perhaps by extreme weather. But they're also a kind of hiding place "behind which" beautiful "violets" bloom. Like the blueberries in line 14, these violets flourish under difficult circumstances. In this way, they might symbolize the resilience of people from the area, who survive and perhaps thrive against the odds.

The speaker then links the region's psychology with its weather, using a seasonal metaphor:

> [...] Spring and winter
> are the mind's chief seasons: ice and the breaking of ice.

This rural environment basically has a warm season and a cold season. These are also "the mind's chief seasons": that is, the polarized climate creates polarized moods in the people who endure it. Things are always in a state of either decay or renewal. Like "ice" forming and "breaking," people in the region feel withdrawn and emotionally cold at times, only to relax and open up toward the world again. (These mood cycles might literally follow the climate cycle, as seasonal depression sets in during the winter, then lifts.) The repetition of "ice" emphasizes that spring and winter are sides of the same coin: one season hands on the baton to the other, year after year.

LINES 20-21

A door in ...
... fields of snow.

The third and final stanza is just two lines long. Its form, content, and tone set it apart from the previous stanzas. Think of the poem as having three stages:

1. The first stanza establishes the poem's premise ("People are made of places").
2. The second discusses this place-identity relationship in a more personal way.
3. The third gets even more personal, demonstrating that relationship in action.

The closing couplet presents an unsettling, mysterious metaphor. A door "blows open" in the speaker's mind, figuratively speaking, and a "frosty wind" blows in. Two things might be happening here:

- A memory might be taking the speaker by surprise. They might be recalling their native landscape vividly and without warning. Sensory experiences like that "wind," which are deeply rooted in a particular place, have such a profound impact that they can return powerfully at any moment.
- This might be more of a mood than a memory. Maybe the speaker experiences a feeling of depression or emptiness, and that feeling evokes the harsh winter climate they know so well.

Either way, those snowy fields can never be *un*seen or *un*felt. They'll always be a part of the speaker—just as sand would be for those who grew up in or near a desert. The repetition of "blows" makes the wind sound all the more forceful and inescapable:

> A door in the mind blows open, and there blows
> a frosty wind from fields of snow.

Long /o/ assonance imposes itself here too: "blows open [...] blows [...] snow". The open /o/ sound supports the image of an "open" door—a kind of breach occurring in the speaker's mind.

The poem's refusal to explain what this sensation means makes it all the more unnerving. In general, the poem never spells out how the speaker was "made" by the place they came from. The ambiguity is deliberate and meant to stimulate the imagination. What's clear, however, is that the speaker's region still has a defining—sometimes disturbing—impact on their psyche. And it always will, because "People are made of places."

SYMBOLS

THE SPEAKER'S HOMETOWN

The speaker offers very little explanation of the poem's main idea—that "People are made of places." Instead, the poem offers imagery that depicts a particular place, and leaves it up to the reader to consider how these details support the speaker's claim. Several of these details have symbolic meaning.

For example, the "woods"—"acres" and acres of them—are associated with remoteness, loneliness, wildness, and anonymity. At the same time, the "blueberry patches in the burned-out bush" (line 14) and the "battered schoolhouses / behind which violets grow" (lines 17-18) evoke resilience and renewal in the face of hardship. In both cases, nature finds a way to survive and even thrive amid a derelict environment. This, in turn, might suggest that the *people* here, too, find little pockets of beauty and joy in difficult circumstances.

The "battered" appearance of the buildings suggests suffering and neglect—perhaps fewer people live here than they once did. (Brewster laments this exact phenomenon in another poem inspired by New Brunswick, "River Song.") The "hens and chickens circl[ing] about / clucking aimlessly" convey boredom and purposelessness (which the beauty of blueberries and violets partly counteracts). It's also worth noting that nature seems freer here than in its "tidily plotted" squares in the city. With that freedom comes a certain amount of grit and danger.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 12-18:** "Where I come from, people / carry woods in their minds, acres of pine woods; / blueberry patches in the burned-out bush; / wooden farmhouses, old, in need of paint, / with yards where hens and chickens circle about, / clucking aimlessly; battered schoolhouses / behind which violets grow."

SPRING AND WINTER

Lines 18-19 describe the psychological makeup of people who come from the speaker's hometown:

> [...] Spring and winter
> Are the mind's chief seasons: ice and the breaking of ice.

The poet is drawing on the traditional symbolism associated with these two times of year. Spring typically suggests optimism, new growth, and letting go of the past. Winter is associated with bleakness, loneliness, sorrow, and loss. The equivalent moods seem to hit people from the speaker's town in a regular cycle. Notice how the speaker connects both moods with "ice," suggesting that they're interdependent—two sides of the same character and environment. An emotional chill settles over the town, then the chill thaws ("break[s]") into sunnier, more optimistic spirits.

In the last stanza, that "frosty" winter feeling comes over the speaker, blowing "A door in the mind" wide open. The fact that it rushes in so forcefully suggests that it's a sudden intrusion—a feeling they'd rather not feel, perhaps, but have no control over.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 20-21:** "A door in the mind blows open, and there blows / a frosty wind from fields of snow."

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

"Where I Come From" uses alliteration at a few choice moments, highlighting key images and linking words and concepts together.

The poem starts by clearly stating—and alliterating!—its main idea. The /p/ sounds in "People are made of places" create a bond between the two nouns, reinforcing the claim that place and personality are linked.

The rest of the stanza then paints an evocative picture of city life, focusing especially on smell: "smell of smog [...] smell of subways." Repeated /s/ sounds intensify these phrases, perhaps reflecting the intensity of the odors themselves.

In the second stanza, which focuses on rural life, the speaker describes "blueberry patches in the burned-out bush" (line 14). Those plosive /b/ sounds pop out of the lines, mimicking the vivid growth of blueberries against the grayish backdrop of fire-scarred shrubbery. That same sound reappears in lines 17-18, in the phrase "battered schoolhouses / behind which violets grow." Here, the forceful /b/ sounds suggest the way weather has beaten and scarred the building, while again highlighting an image of growth amid destruction.

In the final lines, alliteration helps the speaker describe a memory (or vision) of winter wind:

> A door in the mind blows open, and there blows
> a frosty wind from fields of snow.

This is a fricative sound, meaning the mouth has to expel air to make it. This effect subtly evokes the rush of "frosty" air and makes the imagined scene all the more visceral.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "People," "places"
- **Line 4:** "different drops," "smell," "smog"
- **Line 10:** "smell," "subways"
- **Line 14:** "blueberry," "burned-out bush"
- **Line 17:** "battered"
- **Line 18:** "behind"
- **Line 21:** "frosty," "from fields"

IMAGERY

The poem bursts with imagery from start to finish, as it brings various "places" to life on the page. Through sight, sound, smell, and touch imagery, the speaker evokes the experiences and sensations that shape these places' inhabitants.

The imagery in the first stanza focuses on "cities," portraying them as busy, intense, and tightly organized. Both nature and art are "tidily plotted" here—that is, tamed and controlled. Most of this stanza's imagery is smell-based (*olfactory*): "the smell of smog [...] the almost-not-smell of tulips in the spring [...] museum smell [...] the smell of work, glue factories maybe, smell of subways." In the speaker's account, then, the city is an overwhelming and heady mix of odors, many of them unpleasant. Naming all these different odors one after the other conveys the overall intensity of the urban experience.

The point, perhaps, is that city dwellers must cope with constant sensory stimuli in order to survive daily existence.

The second stanza is also full of imagery, but it paints a completely different picture. Here, the poem focuses on where the speaker comes from: a small rural town. (Note that numerous Brewster poems take her native New Brunswick as their setting.) This imagery is mostly visual and evokes an unhurried way of life, in contrast with the urban environment. The buildings need painting, and there aren't many people around, just "hens and chickens [...] clucking aimlessly." "Blueberry patches" appear "in the burned-out bush"; "violets grow" behind "battered schoolhouses." Decay and growth exist side by side, as nature more or less runs wild (it's not "tidily plotted in little squares"). The speaker doesn't specify how this rural scene would shape someone's character, but symbolically, it hints at a certain freedom and resilience.

The poem's final stanza, though partly a metaphor, also contains imagery. It describes a sudden memory in which the speaker's hometown winters come rushing back to them, "frosty" and full of "snow." No matter where the speaker goes, it seems, those harsh seasons will always be a part of them. The poem leaves the image to stick in the reader's mind just as it haunts the speaker's mind.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- Lines 2-3
- Lines 4-11
- Lines 14-18
- Lines 20-21

METAPHOR

The speaker uses metaphor to present and develop the poem's core idea—that identity is strongly linked to place. In the first line, for example, the speaker could have simply said "Places influence people." Framing this idea in figurative terms—as "People are made of places"—makes it more intriguing and evocative, inviting readers to wonder how environments might become the building blocks of character. The next two lines expand on this metaphor, imagining one's home environment as a kind of baggage—not necessarily negative!— "carr[ied]" from place to place.

The speaker develops this idea further in the second stanza, talking more directly about their own experience of place and identity. People from the speaker's area "carry woods in their minds": a variation on the idea in lines 1-3. The woods stay with the speaker wherever they go; they're part of the speaker's psychological makeup.

In lines 18-19, the speaker introduces a seasonal metaphor, again to describe how their home environment affects the psyche:

> [...] Spring and winter
> are the mind's chief seasons: ice and the breaking of
> ice.

The environment, then, is in a continual state of flux between decay and new growth—which, for people, might translate to pessimism and optimism. Maybe locals here go through periods of difficulty, isolation, and depression, which, when the sun comes out and the ice starts to thaw, turn to warmth, connection, and hope. It's hard to define this relationship precisely, and that's not the speaker's aim; they mainly want to affirm the link between place and identity.

The last stanza describes how the speaker's home environment continues to affect them. A metaphorical "door in the mind" blows open: that is, a thought or feeling comes on suddenly, unexpectedly, and forcefully. The speaker feels a "frosty wind" in their mind: a particular mood or sensation returning when they least expect it. Perhaps the speaker is having a literal flash of memory, rooted in the wintry scenes of childhood. Or perhaps the speaker is feeling a sudden *emotional* chill (e.g., fear or sadness). The strange, dreamy logic of this metaphor reflects the mysterious relationship between "People" and "places." One can't pin down this relationship, exactly, but in moments like this one, it certainly feels powerful.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-3:** "People are made of places. They carry with them / hints of jungles or mountains, a tropic grace / or the cool eyes of sea-gazers."
- **Lines 12-13:** "Where I come from, people / carry woods in their minds, acres of pine woods;"
- **Lines 18-19:** "Spring and winter / are the mind's chief seasons: ice and the breaking of ice."
- **Lines 20-21:** "A door in the mind blows open, and there blows / a frosty wind from fields of snow."

REPETITION

Repetition appears in various forms in "Where I Come From." For starters, it's baked into the poem's structure. The first two stanzas each begin with a metaphorical statement about the relationship between people and places. The repetition of "People" (lines 1 and 12) aligns the two stanzas, indicating that the second develops the ideas in the first.

Within the first stanza, the word "smell" appears five times. The poem imposes this one word on its reader as relentlessly as the city foists its odors on the public. Through repetition, in other words, the word "smell" becomes as intense and inescapable as city smells themselves.

In the second and third stanzas, the poem uses diacope. In lines 18-19, this device draws a connection between two metaphorical "seasons" in the mind:

> [...] Spring and winter
> are the mind's chief seasons: ice and the breaking of
> ice.

Though these lines distinguish between "Spring and winter," they define both by their relationship to "ice." The speaker's native environment swings back and forth between freeze and thaw. A similar cycle takes place within the minds and hearts of those who live there. Pessimism and optimism, emotional chilliness and emotional warmth, are two sides of the same coin.

Line 20 then repeats the word "blows" as part of a figurative description:

> A door in the mind blows open, and there blows
> a frosty wind from fields of snow.

The speaker notes that memories of their hometown, or native landscape, can come back to them as suddenly as a wind "blow[ing]" through the "mind." The diacope here suggests both intensity and surprise: that "door in the mind" opens with the force of a revelation.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "People"
- **Line 4:** "smell"
- **Line 5:** "smell"
- **Line 6:** "tidily plotted"
- **Line 7:** "smell"
- **Line 8:** "tidily plotted"
- **Line 9:** "smell"
- **Line 10:** "smell"
- **Line 12:** "people"
- **Line 19:** "ice," "ice"
- **Line 20:** "blows," "blows"

VOCABULARY

Tropic (Lines 1-2) - Characteristic of the hot, humid climate found in regions near the equator.

Grace (Lines 1-2) - Elegance (of movement, manners, etc.) and/or kindness.

Smog (Line 4) - Air pollution; fumes from traffic, industry, etc.

Plotted (Line 6, Line 8) - Arranged methodically; planned out.

Chromium (Line 10) - A metal used in stainless steel. "Chromium-plated" means that this metal is part of the structure of the "office[]" buildings.

Battered (Lines 17-18) - Damaged and shabby.

Violets (Lines 17-18) - Small bluish-purple flowers. Violets are

the official floral emblem of New Brunswick, the Canadian province where Brewster grew up.

Chief (Lines 18-19) - Main; most significant.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Where I Come From" has three stanzas of unequal length: eleven, eight, and two lines (a couplet), respectively.

Both the first and second stanzas start with a bold metaphorical statement, followed by concrete imagery supporting that statement. Though these two stanzas deal with contrasting material—urban and rural environments, respectively—they argue the same point: that where people come from shapes who they are.

The three stanzas also present three angles on the poem's material, with the poem becoming narrower and more subjective as it goes on. The first stanza describes people in general, all of whom are "made of places." The second talks more specifically about people from rural environments, like the one where the speaker grew up. The third and shortest stanza presents a particular psychological experience that ties in with stanza two. Here, the speaker offers a glimpse of what it's like to come from their wintry region—how a "frosty wind" always seems to blow somewhere in "the mind."

METER

"Where I Come From" uses free verse—that is, no traditional meter.

The absence of meter contributes to the poem's fairly informal tone, which fits the speaker's approach to their subject. Though the first two stanzas start with bold statements—that "People are made of places" and that people from the speaker's environment "carry woods in their minds"—the poem never says definitively how these processes work. To the speaker, the connection between place and identity seems undeniable, yet intensely subjective. The lack of strict meter helps ensure that the poem remains an *exploration* of its subject, not a neatly structured argument.

RHYME SCHEME

The poem uses free verse, so it has no rhyme scheme. Its loose form seems to reflect the roughness of the landscape "Where I Come From," as well as the mysterious, unpredictable process by which "People are made of places." (The speaker doesn't pretend to know *how* environment shapes character—they just know instinctively, and from experience, that it does.)

Notice, though, that the poem does end with a semi-rhyming couplet (lines 20-21):

> A door in the mind blows open, and there blows
> a frosty wind from fields of snow.

The imperfect rhyme between "blows" and "snow" chimes with the long /o/ assonance in "blows open." This cascade of /o/ sounds gives the couplet extra punch, evoking the sudden arrival of the "frosty wind" in the speaker's mind.

SPEAKER

The speaker comes from a rural area, where decay and natural growth exist side by side. A "burned-out bush" hides patches of blueberries; violets bloom behind "battered schoolhouses." The speaker doesn't pinpoint where this area is, but it could well be in Brewster's native New Brunswick.

In the first stanza, the speaker reveals little about their own identity. They express a general truth about how "places" shape personalities, then illustrate this truth with reference to urban sights and sounds. In the second stanza, they get more personal, evoking the atmosphere of their hometown and describing how it affects residents.

In the third stanza, that rural world seems to rush back to the speaker in "a frosty wind" of memory. This ending offers a further glimpse into the speaker's psychological landscape, where polarized moods seem to rotate through the "mind" like "seasons." To some extent, it seems, the speaker's temperament is metaphorically "frosty" (as in hardhearted? stoic?). But the speaker never really clarifies how place informs identity—they leave the idea open for readers to consider.

SETTING

"Where I Come From" touches on a number of settings in order to illustrate its main idea: that "People are made of places."

In lines 2-3, for example, the speaker mentions "jungles [...] mountains" as well as "a tropic grace / or the cool eyes of sea-gazers." Four different environments, and the poem has only just started! But the speaker's point is that wherever someone's from, the place will shape them somehow, even in ways as subtle as body language. The speaker then describes yet another environment: the big city. Here, they rely mostly on smell imagery (e.g. the "smell of smog" and the "smell of subways"), reinforcing the idea that places cling to people like a subtle aura or "Atmosphere."

The second stanza balances out this "city" focus by describing where the speaker's from. This setting is rural, rundown, and nearly empty. On the other hand, it's a less restrictive, regulated place, and it has its touches of beauty: "blueberr[ies]" and "violets" growing from fire-scarred brush and behind dilapidated schoolhouses. Even as the poem contrasts these two environments, it shows that they're equally formative for

the people who grow up there.

Where the speaker grew up, there are two main "seasons" that stamp the psyche:

> Spring and winter
> are the mind's chief seasons: ice and the breaking of ice.

Like the landscape, then, the people here always seem to be in a state of either decay or renewal, emotional chilliness or emotional warmth.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Elizabeth Brewster was born in 1922 in New Brunswick, Canada, and grew up in a small logging town called Chipman. She wrote poetry from an early age and was involved in setting up *The Fiddlehead*, one of Canada's foremost literary magazines. Brewster worked at various Canadian universities throughout her career and died in 2012.

Brewster was influenced by modernists like T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound but also took her identity as a *Canadian* poet seriously. Referencing Pound's famous dictum—that poets should "make it [their work] new"—she once said that: "I cannot make it new, but I can make it Canadian." Indeed, place, and specifically her native New Brunswick, is a vital part of Brewster's work. "Where I Come From," which appears in Brewster's 1977 book *Sometimes I Think of Moving*, is one of many Brewster poems that focus on New Brunswick (others include "Woman on a Bus: In New Brunswick Woods" and "River Song"). Readers might also want to check out Fred Cogswell's "New Brunswick."

Note, though, that the poem doesn't name New Brunswick explicitly. Instead, it keeps its setting ambiguous (and thus, perhaps, more broadly relatable), capturing the hold that people's environments in general exert over their minds.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Brewster was part of a mid-20th-century cultural movement that aimed to capture the identity and character of Canada. Her work strives to make a record of places threatened with extinction (or profound alteration) in an increasingly globalized world. It chronicles a shift away from small, tight-knit communities toward ever-expanding cities—the kind warily described in the first stanza here.

The second stanza, meanwhile, describes dilapidated "farmhouses" and "schoolhouses": symptoms of neglect. In the late 20th century, Canadian farms, fishing villages, and logging towns—like the one Brewster grew up in—all suffered under a rapidly changing economy, as many younger residents left for the country's main urban centers.

Again, however, the poem doesn't identify its setting by name. It's only partly about the speaker's hometown; its main aim is to demonstrate the intimate connection between "people" and "places."

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- More by the Author — Dive into more work by Elizabeth Brewster. (https://canlit.ca/canlit_authors/elizabeth-brewster/)
-
-
- Brewster's "Fiddlehead" Obituary — Read a write-up about the poet in the magazine she helped establish. (https://thefiddlehead.ca/content/elizabeth-brewster-1922-2012)
- The Poet's Life and Work — An obituary and retrospective via The Globe and Mail. (https://www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/obituary-elizabeth-brewsters-journey-of-self-awareness-led-to-prolific-poetry-career/article8226920/)
- Where Brewster Comes From — Learn about the poet's native New Brunswick at Encyclopedia Britannica. (https://www.britannica.com/place/New-Brunswick-province)
- "Poetry and Audience" — Read an article by Brewster about the nature of her craft (PDF download). (https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&ved=2ahUKEwjPgJTs1I3W-PRWTb&opi=89978449)

HOW TO CITE

MLA

Howard, James. "*Where I Come From.*" *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 22 Jun 2023. Web. 7 Jul 2023.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Howard, James. "*Where I Come From.*" LitCharts LLC, June 22, 2023. Retrieved July 7, 2023. https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/elizabeth-brewster/where-i-come-from.