

Notes on: The Latin Deli: An Ars Poetica by Judith Ortiz Cofer:

Judith Ortiz Cofer's "The Latin Deli: An Ars Poetica" is about just that kind of soul food, the kind of stuff that feeds your spirit and keeps you going—even if you're a stranger in a strange land.

Her poem, which was first published in 1993, details just how important your local corner deli might be. It points out how that little shop, which you might have passed by without a second thought, is actually filled with smells, sights, and tastes that bring back memories of a lost homeland. For some, it's more than a place to get milk and bread. It's a way to connect to their past, to return to their roots.

The idea of food as a gateway to memory is not a new idea, but Ortiz Cofer is interested in more than just good eats. The deli she describes is an important gathering spot, one where folks from all walks of the Latino experience find something comforting and familiar.

For Ortiz Cofer, this sort of place is familiar territory. A native of Puerto Rico who split her childhood living both there and in the U.S., she's known for her explorations of the Latino experience, straddling both worlds and struggling to find a sense of belonging in either. Luckily for some, they have a place like the Latino Deli where they can turn to for a sense of home.

WHY SHOULD I CARE?

Where is home for you? If you're tempted to answer that question with a physical address, then—we hate to say it—you just don't get it. And if you started to talk about that button on your web browser, well, you're really off.

Do you know who does get it, though? That's right—Judith Ortiz Cofer. Her poem "The Latin Deli: An Ars Poetica" is all about the kind of home you can't find on a smartphone app. She's not talking about four walls and a roof here. She's talking about a more emotional, more communal sense of belonging.

And when you think about it, that intangible feeling is way more important than any granite countertop or backyard deck. Have you ever stopped to wonder about what it actually feels like to be "at home." Who is there? What does it smell and sound like?

This poem provides one set of answers to this kind of question. And it's not just a fancy mental exercise, either. When you get right down to it, knowing why home is home for you is vital component of understanding yourself, your roots, and your family.

So, we'd like to recommend that you take down that hand-stitched "Home is Where the Heart Is" placemat that your great aunt got you for Christmas. That thing was not helping your décor, anyway. Instead, read this poem. Take a moment to truly reflect on what home means for you. When you do, you'll realize just how big a role that idea plays in your life.