Mother

SUMMARY

I realize now, as I did when I was a child and in awe of everything around me, that my mother wanted a perfect world—one not hemmed in by war and people fleeing en masse.

We sit on the floor of the living room. I pull out the gray hairs from her head and ask her, "Mother, what had you wanted to do with your life?" Her smile is never-ending and hangs like question in the air. Her neck bends like a sunflower whose head is too heavy to look up at the sky.

I expect her to tell me that she'd wanted to be a gardener. I think back to my childhood, picturing the shadows that moved in our garden full of trees and cherry tomatoes. I remember her calling to come eat dinner while I was asleep among the lotus ponds.

She tells me that she loved teaching and had wanted to be a high school teacher. I feel happy as I recognize the truth of this. As I smile, memories start to fit together like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, my past suddenly making more sense. "A literacy teacher," I say enthusiastically, and she smiles, eagerly remembering that time I came home from school with a certificate acknowledging that my own literacy had gotten better.

I keep pulling out her grays. Our conversation continues as we're surrounded by the gentle daylight. I realize now, as I did when I was a child and in awe of everything around me, what my mother's life must have been like when she was young, before the violence and destruction of life in Saigon.

I imagine her riding a yellow scooter to school, her hair flowing freely behind her and with a bright smile on her face. I imagine her dashing past the outdoor markets, with their comforting smells of Pho and lychee tea and the loud sounds of rickshaws, bicycles, and scooters going by. I imagine the countryside filled with water buffalo plowing the flooded rice fields as if moving between clouds. I imagine that each scene is charming and pretty as she looks out on it from her classroom window. Soon she will leave all of this behind.

As more gray hairs fall from her head, the past reorganizes itself and I realize now, as I did when I was a child and in awe of everything around me, that I have inherited her desire to teach. I was aware that the responsibilities of taking care of her children proved greater than her aspirations of earning a university teaching degree. And being aware of that, I tell her, "Mother, this week I taught my students about Wordsworth's poem about daffodils. This made me think of you." She smiles and I'm returned to a serene time in my childhood. This makes me think of how she sewed things like pajamas with flowers on them, tablecloths, and bedsheets for less than $5 an hour just so she could buy groceries and pay my school tuition, just so I could keep studying and figure out how to spell the word "persistent." She prayed that I would learn to speak fluent English so that I would never be limited to working in a factory.

I realize now, as I did when I was a child and in awe of everything around me, what it must have been like for my mother to hear the rhythmic sounds of the refugee boats and see the people of Saigon watching. Their eyes were streaked with the brilliance of the flames, the confusion of people dispersed from their homes yet alive in the missile storm.

Her homeland, Vietnam, was shrouded, the deep blue depths of the sea shifting on the horizon like an upset womb. The boats were wet like an open vowel sound, as the city fell to pieces and my mother ran away with nothing except for me, who was growing inside her.

THEMES

THE SACRIFICES OF IMMIGRANT PARENTS

The poem's speaker is the child of a Vietnamese refugee who gave up her own dreams of teaching in order to provide for her family. The speaker realizes that the reason he is able to pursue his *own* career in teaching is because of the sacrifices his mother made. The speaker recognizes that if his mother hadn't set aside her own dreams, he wouldn't be able to speak "an unbroken English tongue"—let alone teach it. The poem thus seeks to highlight and honor the unique sacrifices often made by immigrant parents, particularly refugees, on behalf of their children. Such selflessness, the speaker believes, is what has allowed him to have a better life.

The speaker begins the poem by saying "my mother dreamed of a paradise" beyond the reality of what her life has turned out to be—fleeing her homeland, working long hours for little pay in order to provide for her son. He asks her what her passion was, assuming that she would have liked to be a gardener, but she responds that she would have liked to have taught high school. The speaker is unsurprised when he remembers how happy she was when he came home from school with "a certificate in improved literacy." It occurs to him that his mother gave up her own ambitions of a university degree while putting her child through school so that he would not also be doomed to a life of manual labor.

The speaker then juxtaposes what he knows of his mother's youth in Saigon with what he remembers of her from his own childhood. He pictures his mother driving a scooter on her way

to class, where she was presumably studying to become a teacher. He imagines "the freedom of her hair," an image that contrasts with her life as an immigrant mother, doing manual labor—"sewing pyjamas, tablecloths, bedsheets"—for very little money in order to put food on the table and pay for her child's tuition.

The speaker thinks of "what it must've been to mother" amid the missiles and flames of war-torn Vietnam. He understands how hard it must have been for his mother to leave her native home, her people, her dreams, and that ultimately she made a life-altering decision for the sake of the baby that was growing inside her. She braved the terror and uncertainty of fleeing her homeland, the frightening voyage by boat to a new country, beginning a new life without understanding the language or customs of the country she now lives in, and worked a tiring job for low pay all so that her child could have the life she had once dreamed of for herself.

In ending with an image of the speaker's pregnant mother fleeing Saigon, the poem emphasizes the sacrifices this displaced mother made, and honors the fact that the speaker's very life is something he owes to her strength and determination.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-10
- Lines 17-24
- Lines 28-39
- Lines 43-45
- Lines 49-58
- Lines 59-69

LEGACY AND RESPONSIBILITY

The poem honors the sacrifices that immigrant parents often make for their children while also exploring the responsibility that those children later bear on behalf of their parents. The poem begins with a phrase that implies a kind of realization on the speaker's part: "I know now," he says, implying that he wasn't always fully aware of what his mother did for him until he reached adulthood himself. Learning about his mother then allows the speaker to better understand *himself*, and in this way, the poem presents legacy as a kind of living bond between parents and children. The poem further tasks children with *preserving* that legacy as a means of honoring their parents' sacrifice.

When the speaker discovers that he and his mother share this passion for teaching, this knowledge locks the "puzzle pieces of memory together," allowing him to better understand himself and his mother's past. The speaker realizes that his dream isn't something he just happened upon, but rather is his mother's own deferred dream, passed down to her son. By becoming a teacher, the speaker reasons, his mother will get to see the life she once dreamed of come to fruition through her child.

The speaker recognizes that in becoming a teacher, he is, in a sense, carrying on his mother's legacy. He remembers his mother's joy at his proof of "improved literacy" as a child, and now tells her that "this week I taught my students Wordsworth / saw thousands of daffodils and thought of you." The speaker thus recognizes his own work as an *extension* of his mother's. There is joy and beauty in this connection between them, and also a sense of responsibility, as the speaker realizes that the things his mother once dreamed of and worked for can only be achieved through his own life and decisions. The speaker feels a call to live up to his mother's hopes for him—to embody her legacy with his own life.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-58

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-3

I know now, ...
... war and exodus.

The speaker begins the poem by acknowledging a truth he's always been aware of: that his mother "dreamed of a paradise" beyond war and mass departures. The words "paradise" and "exodus" may allude to the biblical book of Exodus. This book chronicles the departure of the Israelites from Egypt, where they were enslaved. This opening frames the mother's past without giving the reader any concrete details: she grew up in a place filled with violence, a place from which people fled in huge numbers.

The opening three lines ("I know now [...] war and exodus.") express the speaker's sense of disappointment on behalf of his mother—who presumably no *longer* dreams of paradise—and also the speaker's own sense of awe towards his mother, who survived all this "war and exodus."

These lines also establish the poem's interesting use of punctuation (or, really, it's refusal to use traditional punctuation). While there is a comma within the first line and a period at the end of the third line, there is no clarifying punctuation at the ends of these lines. Instead, the poet relies on white space and the reader's own instincts.

This lack of punctuation gives the illusion of enjambment in lines that are not actually enjambed. Both lines one and two are *technically* end-stopped—there are implied pauses after "wonder" and "paradise"—but, thanks to the lack of punctuation, the reader can't actually know this for certain until their eye drops to the following line and it becomes clear that a new clause has begun.

The effect is a kind of tension between one line and the next. The reader is not certain whether they should pause for breath or not (as opposed to an obviously end-stopped line or an obviously enjambed line, both of which indicate whether one should pause for breath).

Perhaps this is indicative of the speaker's relationship with his own childhood and with his mother's past; the speaker is not comparing his current knowledge with the knowledge he had as a child, but rather expressing a *continuity* between these two states of "wonder." In other words, the speaker has always been and remains in awe of his mother's life and the difficulties she has faced.

LINES 4-6

On the living ...
... passion in life?'

Lines 4-6 develop the relationship between the speaker and his mother. Note the interesting syntax (or arrangement of words) of line 4: "On the living room carpet we sit" begins with a preposition ("on") and defers the subject and verb of the sentence ("we sit") until the end of the sentence, as opposed to the more natural and direct "We sit on the living room carpet."

This causes emphasis to fall on the word "sit" rather than "carpet," and draws attention to the fact that the two are spending time together, not just accidentally but intentionally, and informally. They aren't just sitting together, but participating in an act of grooming—the speaker is pulling gray hairs from his mother's head, something she might have difficulty doing on her own. This scene evokes intimacy and care; this is a loving dynamic between mother and child.

The speaker punctuates this intimacy by asking a personal question about his mother's "passion in life." The use of the word "ever"—"what **ever** was your passion"—implies a kind of bewilderment. It's almost like the speaker is just realizing out of the blue that he doesn't know this important facet of his mother's life and identity. This creates a bit of contrast; the two clearly share a nurturing intimacy, and yet the mother is still somewhat mysterious to her own child.

LINES 7-10

She smiles—that eternal ...
... meet the sky.

The speaker's mother responds to her child's question about what her passion in life was by smiling. The diacope in line 7 ("She **smiles**—that eternal **smile**") emphasizes the speaker's perception of the mother—that she is *always* smiling. The word "eternal" suggests that her smile seems to go on forever. It seems that, despite the difficulties she's lived through (the "war and exodus" referred to in the first stanza), she's a person who has a deep reserve of joy.

The speaker goes on to describe her smile as "a question suspended in mid-air," a metaphor, perhaps, for the mother's sense of curiosity and wonder—a sense that seems to have been passed down to her child.

But while her smile seems to float in the air, the speaker says, "Her neck tilts like a sunflower." On the one hand, this simile describes her current position as the speaker plucks gray hairs from her head. But it also evokes the bright, sun-seeking demeanor of the sunflower, as well as the dramatic way its head slumps over its stalk in late summer, when it has become "too heavy to meet the sky." The speaker clearly admires his mother—there is no flower that grows as tall in its quest for light as the sunflower. But there is also a deep sadness to this description, as the speaker acknowledges that the mother's ambitions are no longer within her reach.

LINES 11-16

Gardening is the ...
... amongst lotus-dotted ponds.

Before the speaker's mother can answer his question, the speaker assumes she'll say that her "passion in life" was gardening. In this way, the speaker perhaps subtly implies that he thought his mother had more or less lived the life she had hoped to live.

The speaker remembers his mother's garden from his own childhood, which was clearly a source of pleasure for the speaker. He recalls "shadows / stirring beneath star fruit trees" and an abundance of cherry tomatoes. He also remembers "sleeping / amongst lotus-dotted ponds" and being called, presumably by his mother, to come eat supper.

This idyllic scene illustrates the level of nurturing and care the speaker received as a child, and is a testament to his mother's parenting. Clearly, the speaker was not only provided for, but also felt safe and peaceful there among his mother's plants. It's no wonder, then, the speaker assumes that his mother's passion was gardening, given that she evidently put time and effort into growing this peaceful haven. The fact that the speaker is not aware of any other life his mother may have dreamed of perhaps goes to show that his mother's priority was providing a good life for her child.

In any case, the prevalent use of sibilance—the /s/ sounds in "**s**tirring," "**s**tar," fen**c**es," "**s**upper," "**s**leeping," "amongst," and "lotus"—combined with the pleasant imagery in this stanza evokes the serenity of the speaker's childhood memories associated with his mother's gardening.

LINES 17-20

'Teaching was my ...
... past made whole.

Contrary to the speaker's assumption, his mother reveals that she had wanted to be a high school teacher, that "Teaching was [her] passion."

Rather than being surprised, the speaker "smile[s] in agreement." This gut response indicates that on some level, the speaker must have always seen this side of his mother without realizing it. As soon as he starts to think about it, he realizes this answer makes complete sense—so much so that the speaker describes the "jigsaw-puzzle pieces of memory lock[ing] together."

This metaphor speaks to the way that people's childhoods often don't quite make sense until they become adults and are able to communicate with their parents about things that might have seemed mysterious when they were younger. The speaker has all the pieces of the puzzle of his childhood, so to speak; it only took finding out this small piece of his mother's history to "lock" it into place.

It seems the speaker has reached a new understanding of the way his own life fits together with his mother's. He claims his "past [has been] made whole," a statement that shows how important this knowledge of his mother's life is for the speaker. It's as if he can see the whole picture now.

LINES 21-24

'A literacy teacher,' ...
... of improved literacy.

In response to his mother's revelation that she had wanted to be a high school teacher, the speaker "exclaims" his sudden realization that his mother would have liked to teach "literacy" specifically. This excited response is spurred by the speaker's memory of having come home with "a certificate of improved literacy" issued by his school, and his mother's positive reaction to this event.

The presence of asyndeton in lines 21-22 does some interesting work here:

> 'A literacy teacher,' I exclaim,
> she smiles, remembering with excitement

What's interesting is the poet's choice to place a comma after "exclaim" rather than a period. With a period, the sentence would have ended, and "She smiles, remembering with excitement" would begin an entirely new sentence—clearly demarcating which actions and feelings belong to the speaker and which belong to his mother.

Instead, Pham blurs the two. In doing so, the phrase "remembering with excitement" may be linked to the *speaker's* exclamation and memory of having brought the certificate home, or it may be linked to the mother's smile and memory of having taken pride in the speaker coming home with the certificate. Because of the presence of asyndeton, neither of these interpretations is ruled out, and, in a way, it doesn't matter—their excitement is mutual, shared. The speaker's success and the mother's happiness are bound together.

LINES 25-29

I continue to ...
... bloodshed in Saigon.

The speaker returns to plucking out his mother's gray hairs as he begins to reflect on the new information he has about her.

This stanza contains two instances of repetition. The first, the image of the speaker plucking the mother's gray hairs, reorients the reader back to the present moment of the poem. It points to the fact that, although the speaker is going on a bit of a journey internally in terms of understanding his relationship to his mother, in actual fact his is still just sitting on the floor with his mother, engaging in this intimate, familial act. There is a sense of peacefulness as the "conversation lingers on" and "the soft daylight illuminates" them. They aren't in any hurry; there's nothing happening, except inside the speaker.

The second instance of repetition is with the recurring phrase, "I know now, as I did in my childhood wonder." This phrase again links the present moment with the speaker's childhood, and the way he has continued to be in a state of "wonder" regarding the things his mother has lived through, beginning with "the bloodshed in Saigon."

This allusion to the Vietnam War and the Fall of Saigon clues the reader into what the mother has lived through as well. It is clear that whatever the mother's life was like in her "youth," the outcome of the war in Vietnam changed it.

LINES 30-34

I picture her ...
... and lychee tea;

The speaker imagines what his mother's life was like "before the bloodshed in Saigon." He pictures her "driving a yellow scooter"—the yellow perhaps corresponding to the speaker's earlier description of the mother as a sunflower.

There is a brightness and optimism to this image of the mother as a girl on her way to school. The speaker imagines "the freedom of her hair," perhaps seeing it flowing out behind her instead of tied up for work, and her "glimmering smile." It seems the mother is always smiling, or at least this is how the speaker thinks of the mother. In this imagined scene, the mother "spirit[s] past / street markets [and] the soothing aromas" of popular Vietnamese foods. There is a sense of her belonging in this picture, a lightness and ease.

The good feelings the speaker associates with his mother's youth are not only evoked through word choice, but also through the presence of sibilance, alliteration, and consonance in these lines. Note the particularly thick repetition of sounds in lines 32-33:

> of her hair, a glimmering smile; spiriting past
> street markets, the soothing aromas

There is even a bit of assonance in this stanza with "scooter" and "school," "aromas" and "Pho," "street," "lychee," and "tea." Even though there is no rhyme or meter regulating this passage, it still has a nearly euphonic effect. There is certainly a heightening of imagery (language that appeals to the senses) and sound.

LINES 34-38

that familiar ...
... her classroom window;

The speaker's imagining of his mother's youth continues, and so too does the heightened imagery and sound. In addition to the sights and smells described in earlier lines, there is now also language appealing to the reader's sense of hearing: the speaker imagines a "familiar / crescendo of rickshaws, bicycles, and scooters."

The "crescendo" here is evoked through thick consonance: /k/, /s/, /sh/, /l/, /p/, /f/, and /d/ sounds are all repeated, with the sharp combination of /k/, /p/, and /sh/ sounds in particular amping up the volume of the passage:

> crescendo of rickshaws, bicycles and scooters;
> landscapes of water buffalo, ploughing
> the flooded paddies from cloud to cloud; each one
> picturesque from her classroom window; [...]

The speaker describes these landscapes that the young mother can see from her classroom as "picturesque"—that is, lovely and charming and quaint. The use of the word "picturesque" reveals the speaker's idealization of his mother's youth. He imagines his mother as happy and carefree, the world around her beautiful and filled with things worth seeing and hearing and smelling.

Whether this picture of the past is based on things the speaker's mother has actually told him or if the speaker is simply idealizing a time and place that he has never seen is not clear. Either way, it's apparent that the speaker understands that "the bloodshed in Saigon" took something precious from the mother: a world of possibilities.

LINES 38-42

and all of ...
... down to me—

The speaker acknowledges that everything he imagined regarding his mother's youth—the sounds and the smells and the picturesque landscapes and the possibilities—belongs a "city she will no longer call home." The mother, a refugee forced to leave her home, had her future stolen from her.

After the stanza break, the speaker again returns to the present with attention to the gray hairs he's plucking from his mother's head. This, along with the speaker's repetition of "I know now, as I did in my childhood wonder" has become a kind of mantra that the speaker uses to return to the present moment of the poem.

The speaker feels the past "realign[ing] itself" as it occurs to him that his desire to teach was never just something he stumbled into on his own, but rather was passed down to him by his mother. This sense of inheritance connects the speaker to his mother in a profound way. The word "legacy" implies that the speaker has benefited from his mother's labor. The speaker once again connects this present realization with his sense of wonder as a child—he has always been aware on some level or another that his mother was working to secure his own future.

LINES 43-48

I knew the ...
... thought of you.'

The speaker has known for some time that his mother had to give up pursuing a university degree in order to live up to her responsibilities as a parent. It's important to remember here the unique challenges facing an immigrant mother, and more specifically, one who left her country as a refugee. The speaker is only just now fully appreciating the profound sacrifice she made to take care of her children, foregoing her own aspirations to make theirs possible.

The speaker feels the weight of this sacrifice and wants to make his mother proud. He tells her that upon teaching Wordsworth (a famous English Romantic poet) to his students, he "saw thousands of daffodils and thought of [her]."

This is an allusion to one of Wordsworth's most famous poems, "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud." In this poem, a lonely, wandering speaker encounters a vast number of daffodils beside a lake and succumbs to the joy and pleasure of seeing them—a joy and pleasure that stays with the speaker long after seeing the flowers, and which renders the speaker's solitude blissful.

The allusion not only reveals that the speaker feels indebted to the mother for being able to teach, but that the speaker associates the simple joy and pleasure of encountering daffodils with his mother, who, after all, was the source of the idyllic garden from the speaker's childhood.

LINES 49-53

She smiles and ...
... pork, Asian vegetables

The mother smiles again, and this time her smile reminds the speaker of "a halcyon-time / in childhood" when his mother worked hard "to afford rice, pork, Asian vegetables." The contrast between the speaker's mother's reality at this time—doing tiring, manual labor for "less than $5 an hour" just to put food on the table—and the speaker's memory of this time as idyllic, serene, and peaceful is a testament to the mother's success as a parent. What was likely a very difficult time in her

life is a time that the speaker feels fondly towards, a time when he felt safe and cared for, a simple and happy time.

The asyndeton present in lines 51 ("pajamas, tablecloths, bedsheets together") and 53 ("to afford rice, pork, Asian vegetables") creates a sense of acceleration leading up to lines 54-58 ("and help pay [...] labour of factories."). The mother's responsibilities seem to build up endlessly.

The enjambment between lines 50 and 51 ("in childhood that reminds how she stitched floral / pyjamas") then puts stress on the word "floral," hearkening back to the speaker's assumption that the mother's passion in life was gardening. Line 51 ("pyjamas, tablecloths, bedsheets together"), however, subverts the speaker's remembrance of languishing in the garden; instead, it shows the reality of his mother's situation, performing whatever work she could to make ends meet.

LINES 54-58

and help pay ...
... labours of factories.

The speaker's mother worked not only to support her children through childhood, but to help pay for the speaker's tuition, so that he "could learn to spell 'persistent' correctly." His mother thus didn't just want to provide for her children; she wanted to give them the best possible chance at being able to pursue their own ambitions as adults—something she was unable to do.

This idea that the speaker learns to spell the word "persistent" because of the mother's hard work speaks to the values she wishes to impart to her children. It's important to her that her child is not only educated, but also that he understand the value of working hard and not giving up on his ambitions.

The mother's hope is ultimately that her child will learn to "speak an unbroken English tongue" so that he will not miss out on opportunities the way she did. The speaker recognizes that he is not "confined / to the labours of factories" because he is able to speak fluent English, and because his mother made sacrifices in order for that to be true.

The lack of punctuation at the ends of lines 49-57 ("She smiles and [...] never be confined") suggests a continuity between the mother's smile and the speaker's lack of confinement. Her love and sacrifice has bought the speaker a different life from her own.

LINES 59-61

I know now, ...
... refugee boat's thrum,

After the stanza break, the poem again uses repetition to bring the speaker back to the present moment. He says once again, "I know now, as I did in my childhood wonder"—but this time the knowledge the speaker is describing is more direct. The speaker is aware, as he has always in some way been aware, "what it must've been to mother."

In other words, the speaker recognizes the immense difficulty of his mother's decisions made on her child's behalf—her decisions to leave Saigon, to make the frightening journey across the sea by boat, to enter an unknown country, to make a life there despite not knowing the language, to raise her children with love and devotion even though it meant giving up her own aspirations.

The speaker also recognizes the terrible fear his mother must have felt "there / among the refugee boat's thrum," and the incredible amount of courage she displayed in doing what had to be done. The speaker's "childhood wonder" seems to have always been caught up in his admiration and surprise at his mother's strength and determination, in her ability to do what must have felt impossible—setting out into the unknown while her city fell behind her, providing a good life for her children despite having nothing herself, and somehow, amid all this difficulty, still having the strength and resilience to smile at her children with assurance and love.

LINES 61-64

the faces ...
... the missile storm.

The speaker goes on to more thoroughly describe the nightmare his mother lived through. As she fled her home, she had a sense of her people watching her go, many of whom would die in the violence that ensued.

The speaker describes "eyeballs ribboned with flames / incandescent," a chilling image of destruction. He then imagines "a disorder of diaspora animate / in the missile storm." In other words, while the city fell to missiles and many died, many others were fleeing, spreading out in every direction. The speaker is perhaps thinking of all the other people who faced the same impossible choices as his mother—those who would leave the only home they'd ever known, raise children in strange countries, watch those children become comfortable in those countries in a way they never would.

These lines are filled with alliteration and consonance. Note the repetition of the heavy /d/ sound and the hissing sibilance in "incandescent, a disorder of diaspora." This connects the words "disorder" and "diaspora," linking the reality of being displaced with confusion. There is pain and longing in this phrase as well—what would the mother's life have been like if she *hadn't* been forced to leave her home, her people? What would the speaker's life be like? This perhaps reveals a more somber side to the speaker's "childhood wonder," as the word wonder may also connote bewilderment, or at least a deep sense of desire and curiosity about something inexplicable.

LINES 65-69

The homeland was ...
... me, growing inside.

In the final stanza, the speaker describes "The homeland"—that

is, Vietnam—fading from view as his mother flees.

He imagines the scene from his mother's point of view, looking back and seeing only "a mist," her country already fading from view. She looks forward and sees "the cerulean / depths of the sea," a great unknown expanse. This expanse "stir[s] [...] like some agitated womb," a simile suggesting that the mother is being reborn in this moment; the sea, like a womb, will deliver her from the comfort of the only home she's ever known into a life she can't even begin to imagine.

The speaker describes the boats as "wet as one long vowel," another simile, this one seeming to imply the boats are like the cry of a mother giving birth, or like the cry of a child being born (or some combination of both).

The sibilance in this evokes the hushed fear and anxiety of the refugees setting out on a terrifying journey, as well as the reverence of the speaker imagining this scene. Take lines 65-66:

> The homeland was a mist, the cerulean
> depths of sea stirred [...]

The speaker then describes the city falling and his mother leaving among the boats, before finally revealing that his mother was pregnant with him as she left Saigon. It isn't clear from the poem whether the mother was aware of her pregnancy at the time, but regardless, it's clear that she left her whole life behind—her whole life except for her unborn child, who would become her future.

SYMBOLS

YELLOW

Several times throughout the poem, the speaker associates his mother with the color yellow, and specifically with yellow flowers. The color symbolizes his mother's bright hopes and dreams.

In lines 9-10 ("Her neck tilts [...] meet the sky.") for example, the speaker compares his mother to a sunflower bending over its stalk, its head too heavy to meet the sky. This shows the way his mother's hopes and dreams are no longer within reach.

In contrast, the speaker imagines his mother earlier in her life, riding "a yellow scooter," the road ahead filled with possibility. The image of her driving the scooter, her hair waving behind her and a smile on her face, suggests that at this point in her life, the speaker's mother had some control over and hope for her future; it was self-directed, and her dreams were within sight.

As the poem progresses, it becomes clear that the mother's dream of teaching will not be realized by her but by her child, the speaker. Later in the poem, the speaker tells his mother that he "saw thousands of daffodils and thought of [her]." Daffodils, like sunflowers, are yellow in color, and their mention here again evokes the mother's once-bright hopes for the future—a future that her child now seeks to fulfill on her behalf.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 9-10:** "Her neck tilts like a sunflower / too heavy to meet the sky."
- **Lines 30-31:** "I picture her driving a yellow scooter / on the road to school,"
- **Lines 47-48:** "'Mother, this week I taught my students Wordsworth / saw thousands of daffodils and thought of you.'"

POETIC DEVICES

ENJAMBMENT

Broadly speaking, enjambment reflects the free-flowing nature of the poem. The poem is written in free verse, with no rhyme scheme, meter, or stanza form to contain it, and this looseness evokes the comfortable, intimate relationship between the speaker and his mother. Enjambment adds to this effect, letting the poem unfurl down the page freely and pulling the reader forward through its many lines.

Enjambment is also interesting in this poem in large part because of the way it is in tension with the use of punctuation. Pham often foregoes conventional punctuation at the ends of lines. Without punctuation, a line will seem to carry over even when it has actually reached its syntactical conclusion (essentially, the end of a clause or phrase) or at least a pause.

Examples of this abound. In lines 1-3 ("I know now [...] war and exodus"), conventional rules of grammar would call for a comma following the dependent clause "as I did in my childhood wonder" as well as a comma or em dash following the word "paradise," as the following line is also a dependent clause. These punctuation marks would indicate to the reader that they should pause and take a breath at the end of the line. The passage would have looked like this:

> I know now, as I did in my childhood wonder,
> that my mother dreamed of a paradise—
> one unbound by war and exodus.

Instead, Pham chooses *not* to employ punctuation in either of these situations, pushing the reader to continue without pause across the line breaks—and making the lines *appear* enjambed. Yet, at the same time, because many of the lines are *syntactically complete* (basically, they contain discrete phrases with implied pauses at the end), the reader may choose to pause at the end of a line anyway.

The result is a kind of tug-of-war between the reader paying attention to syntax (the arrangement of words) or paying attention to a lack of punctuation.

Another example of this comes in line 4 ("On the living room carpet we sit"), which is not only grammatically complete, but is in fact its own sentence—once the reader has continued on to line 5 ("I pluck her grey hairs and ask:"), it will become clear that a new, separate sentence has begun. For this reason, line 4 might be interpreted as end-stopped even though it *looks* enjambed.

Ultimately, the choice falls with the reader to decide how they're going to read these lines and whether they will pause at the end of a syntactically complete line despite a lack of punctuation indicating that they should do so.

Other places in the poem employ more conventional enjambment, however. In lines 30-39 (I picture her [...] longer call home.") for example, enjambment allows a long sentence to be broken up over various lines, and the pauses in lines created by punctuation all fall *within* lines rather than at their end. For this reason, this passage has a flow to it that those earlier stanzas lacked. The reader soon learns to trust the momentum of the enjambment, knowing they will be given ample opportunity to pause within lines, rather than having to figure out whether white space is implying the end of a clause or sentence, as in earlier examples.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 9-10:** "sunflower / too"
- **Lines 12-13:** "shadows / stirring"
- **Lines 13-14:** "trees / rows"
- **Lines 14-15:** "fences / a"
- **Lines 15-16:** "sleeping / amongst"
- **Lines 18-19:** "do / jigsaw-puzzle"
- **Lines 19-20:** "memory / lock"
- **Lines 22-23:** "excitement / the"
- **Lines 23-24:** "school / with"
- **Lines 26-27:** "on / as"
- **Lines 28-29:** "wonder / about"
- **Lines 30-31:** "scooter / on"
- **Lines 31-32:** "freedom / of"
- **Lines 32-33:** "past / street"
- **Lines 33-34:** "aromas / of"
- **Lines 34-35:** "familiar / crescendo"
- **Lines 36-37:** "ploughing / the"
- **Lines 37-38:** "one / picturesque"
- **Lines 38-39:** "which / was"
- **Lines 40-41:** "and / I"
- **Lines 41-42:** "wonder / that"
- **Lines 43-44:** "providing / for"
- **Lines 44-45:** "outweighed / university-degree"
- **Lines 49-50:** "halcyon-time / in"
- **Lines 50-51:** "floral / pyjamas"
- **Lines 51-52:** "together / using"
- **Lines 52-53:** "hour / to"
- **Lines 53-54:** "vegetables / and"
- **Lines 54-55:** "tuition / so"
- **Lines 56-57:** "tongue / and"
- **Lines 57-58:** "confined / to"
- **Lines 59-60:** "wonder / what"
- **Lines 60-61:** "there / among"
- **Lines 61-62:** "faces / of"
- **Lines 62-63:** "flames / incandescent"
- **Lines 63-64:** "animate / in"
- **Lines 65-66:** "cerulean / depths"
- **Lines 66-67:** "womb / boats"
- **Lines 67-68:** "crumbled / and"
- **Lines 68-69:** "fled / with"

IMAGERY

This poem utilizes imagery a great deal. In the poem's present, the speaker is physically located on the living room carpet with his mother, but the poem mostly unfolds through a series of memories and imaginings of the past. Vivid imagery grants the reader access to what the speaker is seeing or remembering.

In the present, there is the living room carpet and the mother's gray hairs, which the speaker is plucking. This is both a visual image and a tactile one, as the word "pluck" evokes the resistance of the hair being pulled from the mother's head. There is also the mother's smile, her neck "tilt[ing] like a sunflower," and "the soft daylight illuminat[ing]" the speaker and his mother while they sit together and talk.

The speaker's memories are even more engaging than what he can see in the present, however. He remembers, for example:

> [...] shadows
> stirring beneath star fruit trees
> rows of cherry tomatoes growing over fences
> a call to supper while sleeping
> amongst lotus-dotted ponds.

This memory engages the reader's sense of sight and hearing, while also perhaps making them a little sleepy and envious of such tranquility.

Most evocative, however, is what the speaker can't see or remember, but what he *imagines* about his mother's past. He sees her smiling on a yellow scooter, her hair whipping behind her. He smells the "soothing aromas / of Pho and lychee tea." He hears the "familiar / crescendo of rickshaws, bicycles and scooters." And, later, he imagines his mother leaving Saigon, hearing "the refugee boat's thrum," seeing eyes "ribboned with flames," and feeling the boats "wet as one long vowel." It seems the speaker finds inspiration in thinking about what his mother

has been through, who she was and who she might have been.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Lines 4-5:** "On the living room carpet we sit / I pluck her grey hairs and ask:"
- **Lines 7-10:** "She smiles—that eternal smile / a question suspended in mid-air. / Her neck tilts like a sunflower / too heavy to meet the sky."
- **Lines 12-16:** "shadows / stirring beneath star fruit trees / rows of cherry tomatoes growing over fences / a call to supper while sleeping / amongst lotus-dotted ponds."
- **Lines 25-27:** "I continue to pluck her grey hairs / our conversation lingers on / as the soft daylight illuminates us."
- **Lines 30-38:** "I picture her driving a yellow scooter / on the road to school, the freedom / of her hair, a glimmering smile; spiriting past / street markets, the soothing aromas / of Pho and lychee tea; that familiar / crescendo of rickshaws, bicycles and scooters; / landscapes of water buffalo, ploughing / the flooded paddies from cloud to cloud; each one / picturesque from her classroom window"
- **Line 40:** "More grey hairs fall,"
- **Line 48:** "saw thousands of daffodils"
- **Lines 50-52:** "she stitched floral / pyjamas, tablecloths, bedsheets together / using a sewing machine"
- **Line 53:** "rice, pork, Asian vegetables"
- **Lines 60-69:** "there / among the refugee boat's thrum, the faces / of Saigon watching—eyeballs ribboned with flames / incandescent, a disorder of diaspora animate / in the missile storm. / The homeland was a mist, the cerulean / depths of sea stirred on the horizon like some agitated womb / boats wet as one long vowel, as the city crumbled / and my mother among them fled / with nothing but me, growing inside."

SIMILE

There are three similes in the poem. The first is in the second stanza, when the speaker describes his mother's neck as "tilt[ing] like a sunflower / too heavy to meet the sky." This simile allows the reader to really visualize the way the mother's head is falling forward on her bent neck while the speaker plucks her gray hairs, but it also does more than that. It compares the mother to a sunflower, that bright and ambitious flower that grows tall in pursuit of the sun. This sunflower, however, has grown so heavy that it can no longer hold itself up. This only happens when the flower becomes heavy with seed—and in a way, this is true for the mother too; her ambitions have given way to being a mother. Her time of looking to the sky is done, but her seed—her offspring, the speaker—will grow and blossom in her stead.

In the final stanza, there are two similes back-to-back, and they are part of the same image. The first is when the speaker says "the cerulean / depths of sea" are stirring "like some agitated womb." This simile draws attention to the way that the mother is essentially starting her life over from scratch, with practically nothing, when she takes to the sea to escape Vietnam. The sea is a kind of mother, delivering her into her new life. (This lends some added resonance to the title of the poem).

The second, related simile is in line 67. The speaker describes the "boats wet as one long vowel." This again equates the journey of the refugees to a kind of labor, both in terms of their leaving the comfort of their home and being delivered into new lives as well as in terms of the difficulty and pain of labor—the "one long vowel" may be interpreted as the moaning and screaming of a mother giving birth.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Lines 9-10:** "Her neck tilts like a sunflower / too heavy to meet the sky."
- **Lines 65-66:** "the cerulean / depths of sea stirred on the horizon like some agitated womb"
- **Line 67:** "boats wet as one long vowel"

METAPHOR

There are a few metaphors throughout the poem. The first is in line 2, when the speaker claims that his mother "dreamed of a paradise." This paradise is in contrast to the "war and exodus" of her homeland, and really just speaks to what was lost: the mother's sense of belonging and peace and possibility. This may also be considered a moment of hyperbole—that is, exaggeration—on behalf of the speaker, as the mother didn't literally dream of a paradise so much as she dreamed the ordinary dreams of someone who didn't know her future was going to be pulled out from under her. She dreamed of being a schoolteacher, but even that modest dream was denied her.

In the second stanza, the speaker describes the mother's smile as "eternal" and as "a question suspended in mid-air." These metaphorical descriptions speak to the way that the speaker perceives his mother. To him, his mother is a person who is always smiling, someone who is joyful and curious, someone who has a childlike sense of wonder.

In lines 19-20 ("jigsaw-puzzle pieces [...] past made whole."), the speaker describes memory as a puzzle that, up until now, he hadn't been able to put together. Only in better understanding his mother's life, and in particular knowing that she had wanted to be a teacher, does the speaker have access to the whole picture of his past.

Later, in lines 31-32 ("on the road [...] smile; spiriting past"), the speaker imagines "the freedom / of [his mother's] hair" when she was young and living in Saigon and riding her scooter to school. This is both imagery (readers can picture the mother's hair flying loose around her face as she rides her scooter) and metaphor. Ultimately, the image speaks to the openness of the

mother's life back then, when she lived in her home country and understood the language and was free to follow her passion. It is contrast to her life now, where she works what jobs are available to immigrant women who don't speak "unbroken" English, and where she even very likely has to tie her hair back for work.

Finally, in line 40 ("More grey hairs [...] realigns itself and"), the speaker claims that, now understanding his mother's history a little better, his "past realigns itself." Of course, the past is not *literally* rearranging itself; rather, the speaker is expressing that his sense of the past has changed due to this new information. In other words, he sees things differently now.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "my mother dreamed of a paradise"
- **Lines 7-8:** "that eternal smile / a question suspended in mid-air."
- **Lines 19-20:** "jigsaw-puzzle pieces of memory / lock together, my past made whole."
- **Lines 31-32:** "the freedom / of her hair"
- **Line 40:** "the past realigns itself"

ALLUSION

This poem contains a few allusions to outside texts and events. The first comes early on, in the first stanza. The speaker says that his mother "dreamed of a paradise / one unbound by war and exodus." While this passage can be interpreted different ways, one way of understanding it is as an allusion to the biblical story of the Israelites leaving Egypt, where they had been enslaved, and making a covenant with God, after which Moses led them to the promised land (the place that would become their home). This speaks to the mother's own emigration from her homeland, and the hopes she'd had for a better life.

Later, in line 29 ("about mother's youth [...] bloodshed in Saigon."), the speaker references "the bloodshed in Saigon." This is an allusion to the end of the Vietnam War and the Fall of Saigon, in which North Vietnam took control of South Vietnam, killing many of the citizens who had been part of the resistance there. These are the events that precipitated the mother's leaving Vietnam, which changed the course of her life.

Finally, in lines 47-48 ("Mother, this week [...] thought of you."), the speaker makes an allusion to a specific poem by William Wordsworth, a famous English Romantic poet. The poem is "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud," and the "thousands of daffodils" reference the "host of golden daffodils" in Wordsworth's poem. For the speaker of Wordsworth's poem, nature is a source of inspiration and comfort. For the speaker of this poem, it seems, nature is not only a source of inspiration and comfort, but a reminder of his mother's love and care, and of his own "halcyon" childhood in which his mother's garden played a pivotal part.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-3:** "my mother dreamed of a paradise / one unbound by war and exodus."
- **Line 29:** "before the bloodshed in Saigon"
- **Lines 47-48:** "'Mother, this week I taught my students Wordsworth / saw thousands of daffodils and thought of you.'"

CONSONANCE

Consonance appears throughout the poem, intensifying the speaker's language and drawing the reader's attention to certain images. The first few stanzas are relatively spare in their use of consonance, with the exception of the first stanza. Here, /d/ and /n/ sounds weave through the lines—calling readers' attention in particular to the phrase that will repeat throughout the poem: "I know now, as I did in my childhood wonder."

Consonance starts to become stronger in the fifth stanza. In lines 25-29 ("I continue to [...] bloodshed in Saigon."), for example, the repetition of /l/ sounds gives the stanza a heightened sense of musicality in comparison to the stanzas preceding it, and signals a deepening of the speaker's thoughts regarding his mother. Take lines 25-28 as an example:

> I continue to pluck her grey hairs
> our conversation lingers on
> as the soft daylight illuminates us.

As the poem launches into the speaker imagining of the mother's youth in stanza 6, several consonant sounds begin to emerge and overlap: /m/, /l/, /f/, /p/, and /k/ sounds all come together to create a sense of musicality and emphasis. These sounds help bring alive the beauty and pleasure of the scene the speaker is imagining. Here are lines 36-38 to illustrate this:

> landscapes of water buffalo, ploughing
> the flooded paddies from cloud to cloud; each one
> picturesque from her classroom window; [...]

In lines 61-66 ("among the refugee [...] some agitated womb"), consonance of /n/, /m/, /r/, /f/, and /d/ sounds overlaps with the poem's use of sibilance. Again, this flurry of sounds heightens the poem's language in this moment and, in turn, makes the imagery all the more vivid for the reader. It is notable that towards the end of the last stanza, as the speaker considers more and more what it was like for his mother to leave her homeland, the /m/ sound—which, of course, is included in the word "mother"—repeats again and again:

> [...] as the city crumbled

and my mother among them fled
with nothing but me, growing inside.

We've highlighted some striking moments of consonance here. Alliteration and sibilance, both of which may be a form of consonance, are discussed separately in this guide.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "know now," "did in," "childhood wonder"
- **Line 2:** "my mother dreamed," "paradise"
- **Line 3:** "unbound"
- **Line 13:** "stirring," "star fruit trees"
- **Line 14:** "rows," "growing"
- **Line 19:** "puzzle," "pieces"
- **Line 25:** "pluck"
- **Line 26:** "lingers"
- **Line 27:** "daylight illuminates"
- **Line 28:** "know," "now," "childhood," "wonder"
- **Line 29:** "bloodshed," "Saigon"
- **Line 31:** "freedom"
- **Line 32:** "glimmering smile"
- **Line 33:** "markets," "aromas"
- **Line 34:** "familiar"
- **Line 36:** "landscapes," "buffalo, ploughing"
- **Line 37:** "flooded paddies from cloud," "cloud"
- **Line 38:** "picturesque," "classroom," "all"
- **Line 39:** "will," "longer," "call"
- **Line 40:** "fall," "realigns"
- **Line 41:** "know," "now," "childhood," "wonder"
- **Line 42:** "legacy," "down"
- **Line 43:** "responsibilities"
- **Line 48:** "daffodils"
- **Line 49:** "smiles," "halcyon"
- **Line 50:** "childhood," "floral"
- **Line 51:** "tablecloths"
- **Line 52:** "less"
- **Line 54:** "help"
- **Line 55:** "learn," "spell," "correctly"
- **Line 56:** "English"
- **Line 58:** "labours"
- **Line 59:** "know," "now," "wonder"
- **Line 60:** "been," "mother"
- **Line 61:** "among," "refugee," "thrum," "faces"
- **Line 62:** "ribboned," "flames"
- **Line 63:** "incandescent," "disorder," "diaspora," "animate"
- **Line 64:** "storm"
- **Line 65:** "homeland," "mist"
- **Line 66:** "some," "womb"
- **Line 67:** "crumbled"
- **Line 68:** "my mother among them"
- **Line 69:** "me"

SIBILANCE

Sibilance is used in two main ways in this poem: to create a sense of musicality that emphasizes the beauty and tranquility of a given image, or to create a sense of reverence around images that portray the difficulty and uncertainty of the mother's situation as she fled Vietnam. In both cases, sibilance encourages the reader to slow down and enunciate and really pay attention to the sounds of the poem.

As an example, look to the third stanza, when the speaker recalls being a child in his mother's garden. This memory is characterized by serenity and comfort, as evidenced in the speaker hearing "a called to supper while sleeping / amongst lotus-dotted ponds."

In lines 30-39 ("I picture her [...] longer call home."), the sibilance creates a sense of reverence as the speaker imagines his mother's life before leaving Saigon. There is a sense of ease and happiness in this stanza too, as the mother is surrounded by peaceful sights and soothing smells and familiar sounds. For example, here is the sibilance in lines 32-33:

of her hair, a glimmering smile; spiriting past
street markets, the soothing aromas

In the final two stanzas of the poem, sibilance has a slightly different effect due to the significance of the imagery. While one can imagine that the falling city was filled with the sounds of "the missile storm" and people fighting and dying, there is a hushed quality to the way the speaker imagines it. He pictures Vietnam as "a mist" and "the faces / of Saigon watching." It is clear that the speaker feels the gravity of this moment and what it meant not only for his mother's life (and therefore his own life), but for all refugees.

Where Sibilance appears in the poem:

- **Line 7:** "smiles," "smile"
- **Line 8:** "question," "suspended"
- **Line 9:** "tilts," "sunflower"
- **Line 10:** "sky"
- **Line 13:** "stirring," "star"
- **Line 14:** "fences"
- **Line 15:** "supper," "sleeping"
- **Line 16:** "amongst," "lotus"
- **Line 30:** "scooter"
- **Line 31:** "school"
- **Line 32:** "smile; spiriting past"
- **Line 33:** "street markets," "soothing"
- **Line 35:** "bicycles," "scooters"
- **Line 36:** "landscapes"
- **Line 38:** "picturesque," "classroom"
- **Line 39:** "city"
- **Line 49:** "smiles," "halcyon"

- **Line 50:** “stitched”
- **Line 51:** “tablecloths,” “bedsheets”
- **Line 52:** “sewing,” “less”
- **Line 55:** “so,” “spell ‘persistent’”
- **Line 56:** “speak”
- **Line 61:** “faces”
- **Line 62:** “Saigon”
- **Line 63:** “incandescent,” “disorder,” “diaspora”
- **Line 64:** “missile”
- **Line 65:** “mist,” “cerulean”
- **Line 66:** “depths,” “sea,” “stirred,” “some”
- **Line 67:** “boats,” “city”
- **Line 69:** “inside”

REPETITION

Repetition can take many forms, but there are three main kinds worth talking about in this poem. The first is the repetition of the opening phrase, "I know now, as I did in my childhood wonder." This phrase acts as a kind of anchor or refrain, bringing the speaker back into the poem's present moment. The speaker is moving back and forth between memory and imagination, but ultimately both of these things serve the speaker's current realization that understanding his mother's history is key to understanding himself.

The second kind of repetition in this poem is slightly different. Instead of a repeated phrase, this is a repeated image: the image of the speaker plucking the mother's gray hairs. The speaker returns to the image three times, and as in the previous example, the repetition has a bit of a grounding effect. However, the wording is slightly different every time, changing from "I pluck her grey hairs," to "I continue to pluck her grey hairs," to "More grey hairs fall." The wording in the final phrase almost suggests a kind of "falling away," as if the speaker can finally see his mother clearly.

The final kind of repetition in this poem is diacope. This can be found in line 7 with the repetition of "smile: "She smiles—that eternal smile" and in line 37 with the phrase "cloud to cloud." The repetition in these examples helps to emphasize the poem's imagery.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “I know now, as I did in my childhood wonder”
- **Line 5:** “I pluck her grey hairs”
- **Line 7:** “She smiles—that eternal smile”
- **Line 25:** “I continue to pluck her grey hairs”
- **Line 28:** “I know now, as I did in my childhood wonder”
- **Line 37:** “cloud to cloud”
- **Line 40:** “More grey hairs fall”
- **Line 41:** “I know now, as I did in my childhood wonder”
- **Line 59:** “I know now, as I did in my childhood wonder”

ASYNDETON

Asyndeton appears a few times in this poem, starting with lines 21-22:

> "'A literacy teacher,' I exclaim,
> she smiles, remembering with excitement"

In this case, the asyndeton occurs after the word "exclaim." The lack of coordinating conjunction between the phrase "I exclaim" and "she smiles" creates a bit of ambiguity, as it then becomes uncertain which subject the dependent phrase "remembering with excitement" is describing—the speaker or his mother. And because it's uncertain, the reader perhaps experiences that excitement as belonging to *both* the speaker and his mother. They share this memory and the pleasure that it brings.

The stanza describing the speaker's mother's youth in Vietnam is filled with asyndeton, as well as consonance, alliteration, and imagery. All these devices combine to create a vivid depiction of the mother's past for the reader, with the asyndeton in particular working to speed the passage up and create a feeling of sensory details piling up on top of one another.

In lines 30-32 ("I picture her [...] a glimmering smile"), for example, asyndeton occurs between the phrases "the freedom / of her hair" and "a glimmering smile." In this case the lack of coordinating conjunction is purely rhythmic—it doesn't really affect the meaning or interpretation of the passage, but rather contributes to the flow of it.

This is also true in line 51 with the lack of coordinating conjunction between "tablecloths" and "bedsheets" and in line 53 between "pork" and "Asian vegetables." This paragraph has a momentum to it that is largely due to a lack of punctuation, but also because of the presence of asyndeton in these lines.

Where Asyndeton appears in the poem:

- **Line 12:** “My mind’s eye turns to childhood, to shadows”
- **Lines 20-22:** “lock together, my past made whole. / ‘A literacy teacher,’ I exclaim, / she smiles, remembering with excitement”
- **Lines 30-32:** “I picture her driving a yellow scooter / on the road to school, the freedom / of her hair, a glimmering smile”
- **Lines 50-51:** “she stitched floral / pyjamas, tablecloths, bedsheets together”
- **Line 53:** “to afford rice, pork, Asian vegetables”

ALLITERATION

The poem is sparing in its use of alliteration, which makes sense: alliteration is a poetic device that calls attention to itself, and the poem is generally contemplative and thoughtful. There's no rhyme scheme or meter here either, and too much alliteration might make things sound overly formal and

constructed, rather than natural and conversational.

That said, there are some moments of alliteration that help elevate the speaker's language and pull readers' attention towards the poem's imagery. Much of this alliteration is more specifically a form of sibilance, discussed separately in this guide.

One of the clearest examples of alliteration is "disorder of diaspora," a phrase that also features consonance of the /s/ and /r/ sounds. This shared sound makes the phase stand out as important for the reader, and also links the refugee experience—those members of the "diaspora"—to chaos, or "disorder."

Also note the repeated /n/ sound of "know now" that appears in the phrase that opens the poem and then repeats throughout. The shared sound adds confidence and emphasis to the speaker's present knowledge.

Lines 30-39 ("I picture her [...] no longer call home.") are particularly thick with alliteration (as well as consonace and sibilance). All this sound reflects the vividness of the imagery as the speaker imagines his mother's youth in Vietnam. The intensity of shared sound effectively turns up the volume on this stanza, making it feel all the more intense and immediate for the reader.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "know now"
- **Line 2:** "my mother"
- **Line 12:** "My mind's"
- **Line 13:** "stirring," "star"
- **Line 15:** "supper," "sleeping"
- **Line 19:** "puzzle pieces"
- **Line 20:** "past"
- **Line 28:** "know now"
- **Line 29:** "before," "bloodshed"
- **Line 30:** "scooter"
- **Line 31:** "school"
- **Line 32:** "her hair," "smile," "spiriting"
- **Line 33:** "street," "soothing"
- **Line 35:** "bicycles," "scooters"
- **Line 36:** "buffalo," "ploughing"
- **Line 37:** "paddies"
- **Line 38:** "picturesque"
- **Line 41:** "know now"
- **Line 59:** "know now"
- **Line 63:** "disorder," "diaspora"
- **Line 65:** "cerulean"
- **Line 66:** "sea stirred," "some," "womb"
- **Line 67:** "wet," "city"
- **Line 68:** "my mother"
- **Line 69:** "me"

VOCABULARY

Wonder (Line 1, Line 28, Line 41, Line 59) - A feeling of awe in response to something unfamiliar, mysterious, beautiful, or unexpected.

Exodus (Lines 2-3) - A mass departure or evacuation of people, particularly emigrants. May also be an allusion to the biblical exodus of the Jewish people from Israel.

Mind's eye (Line 12) - The imagination; the part of the mind that visually remembers or imagines.

The bloodshed in Saigon (Line 29) - An allusion to the Fall of Saigon, alternatively known as the Liberation of Saigon, in which the capital of South Vietnam was captured by the People's Army of Vietnam. This ended the Vietnam War and simultaneously caused tens of thousands of South Vietnamese people to become refugees under the new communist regime.

Pho (Lines 33-34) - A type of Vietnamese soup.

Rickshaws (Lines 34-35) - Two-wheeled vehicles pulled by a person.

Picturesque (Lines 37-38) - Pretty and charming; quaint.

Wordsworth (Line 47) - William Wordsworth, a famous English Romantic poet.

Halcyon (Line 49) - A word that describes a time in the past that was peaceful and happy.

Incandescent (Lines 62-63) - Fiery, intensely hot, or burning.

Diaspora (Line 63) - People living scattered outside their homeland.

Animate (Lines 63-64) - Alive; living.

The homeland (Line 65) - A person or people's native land; in this case, Vietnam.

Cerulean (Lines 65-66) - A deep, dark blue.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Mother" consists of nine stanzas of varying lengths, with a total of 69 lines. Line lengths also vary, and, as it is written in free verse, it does not utilize set meter or a rhyme scheme. In fact, the poem has a very informal, conversational feel to it that reflects the conversation between the speaker and his mother, who seem to have an intimate, comfortable relationship. The lack of conventional punctuation at the ends of lines further emphasizes this informality. There are elements of musicality in the poem due to consonance and sibilance, but without any rhyme, meter, or strict form, the poem has a much more relaxed feel.

METER

The poem is written in free verse, and therefore does not have a specific meter. Lines contain anywhere from five to sixteen syllables, and this looseness of form due to the lack of meter or uniformity of any kind reflects the ease and comfort of the relationship between the speaker and his mother. They are sitting on the floor of their living room, in itself an informal act, while the speaker picks the mother's gray hairs. Their conversation lingers through the afternoon; there's a sense of them having nowhere to be, content to simply be spending time with each other. There is no rigidity in the way they relate to each other or in the way the speaker thinks back on his past and his mother's past. The poem feels natural in its progression, moving around with freedom, and this freedom is reflected in the poet's choice of free verse.

RHYME SCHEME

The poem does not have a rhyme scheme, nor does it utilize rhyme at all for that matter. It does contain moments and even whole stanzas that have a musicality to them, but that musicality is the effect of other sonic devices, such as consonance and sibilance rather than rhyme. Likewise, while rhyme is often used to draw attention to certain words, the poem employs other devices to do this work, such as the repetition of whole phrases or images. This lack of rhyme is in keeping with the poem's lack of a strict form or meter. The poem feels intimate and conversational rather than stilted or stiff.

SPEAKER

The poem's speaker is the adult child of the titular "Mother." This person is thus the child of a Vietnamese refugee living in an English-speaking country, and someone who's had a very different upbringing than his mother did. Where the speaker's mother toiled away to provide for her family in her new country, the speaker seems to have had a happy childhood filled with support and love. He's quite close with his mother as an adult—evidenced by the very intimate act of plucking out her gray hairs—and if his facility with language in the poem is any indication, he has done his mother proud in terms of his own "literacy" studies.

We've referred to the speaker using male pronouns throughout this guide given that the poem is drawn in part from the poet's personal experiences, but do note that the speaker is given no gender in the poem itself.

The poem expresses a moment in which the speaker is realizing that, as well as he thinks he knows his mother, there are still some things he doesn't know—such as what his mother's "passion in life" was. By asking his mother about this, the speaker opens a door to his mother's past that then allows him to not only better understand his mother's life and the sacrifices she made as an immigrant parent, but also to better understand his own history and how his life is a continuation of hers. The speaker eventually comes to see his own teaching career as an extension of his mother's dream of teaching, a dream she was not able to pursue, and this makes the speaker feel even closer to her.

SETTING

The poem bounces between three settings: the speaker's present, of the speaker's youth, and the mother's youth in Vietnam.

The immediate, physical setting of the poem is in "on the living room carpet" where the speaker and his mother are sitting as adults. It seems as though the conversation between the speaker and his mother takes place over the course of an afternoon or evening, as it "lingers on / as the soft daylight illuminates" them. They are in an English-speaking country, but which one is never specified (though the poet himself grew up in Australia).

The other settings in the poem are remembered or imagined by the speaker. For example, the speaker remembers sleeping in a garden during his childhood, being surrounded by "star fruit trees" and "rows of cherry tomatoes growing over fences." This implies that the speaker had a happy childhood, filled with love and care.

The poem then jumps to a different setting as the speaker imagines his mother's life in Saigon before the end of the Vietnam Wars. This setting features a younger version of the speaker's mother driving a scooter through the streets of Saigon, surrounded by lively street markets, the enticing smell of Vietnamese food, and the sound of "rickshaws, bicycles and scooters." The speaker imagines her at school, looking out on "landscapes of water buffalo, ploughing / the flooded paddies from cloud to cloud."

Between remembered and imagined settings, the speaker returns to the present, to the mother's gray hairs falling from her head. Then again the speaker dives into memory, recalling the "floral / pyjamas, tablecloths, [and] bedsheets" his mother sewed together for low wages to put food on the table after leaving Vietnam.

Finally, in the last two stanzas of the poem, the speaker again imagines his mother in Saigon, only this time she is fleeing the city by boat, along with countless other refugees. In this setting the city is burning "in the missile storm," and the speaker's mother is looking back on her crumbling home as the boats pull away from Vietnam.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

"Mother" appeared in Pham's micro-collection *Refugee Prayer*, published by the small press Another Lost Shark in 2013. The collection was influenced heavily by Pham's family, Vietnamese refugees who immigrated to Australia, as well as by his own love for God (he and his family are Catholic) and nature. English Romantic poet William Wordsworth and Japanese Edo poet Bashō are both prominent influences on Pham's work, evidence of which can be seen in Pham's attention to the beauty and serenity of nature (as well as in this poem's allusion to Wordsworth's "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud" in lines 47-48).

More generally, the poem might be said to belong to a growing international literature which focuses at least in part on the experience of diaspora—that is, of a people living scattered outside of their ancestral homeland. In particular, Pham's work should be considered alongside other writers from the Vietnamese diaspora, such as Ocean Vuong, Thi Bui, Chung Chuong Hoang, and Le Thi Diem Thuy, to name just a few.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Vuong Pham was born in Brisbane, Australia, and is the son of Vietnamese refugees.

On April 30, 1975, the Vietnam War came to an end as the People's Army of Vietnam and the Viet Cong took Saigon, at the time the capital of South Vietnam, by force. The war was a struggle between North Vietnam, which was communist (and supported by other communist countries), and South Vietnam, which was anti-communist (and supported by other anti-communist countries); it went on for 19 years. Upon the Fall of Saigon (also known as the Liberation of Saigon, depending on one's perspective), Vietnam began the process of becoming one united, communist country. When this happened, many thousands of South Vietnamese citizens were forced to flee Saigon.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Poems for Mothers — A list of poems celebrating mothers (rounded up by the Poetry Foundation in honor of Mother's Day). (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/68655/mothers-day-poems-56d2484336db6)
- An Interview with the Poet — Read an interview with Vuong Pham for Another Lost Shark. (https://grahamnunn.wordpress.com/tag/interview-with-vuong-pham/)
- Poems on Immigration — A collection of poems about and by immigrants. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/collections/144265/poems-on-immigration)
- Refugee Poetics — An article by Jill Magi for Poetry magazine that discusses "A Refugee Poetics." (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2019/04/true-poems-flee-a-refugee-poetics-or-poetry-as-permanently-temporary)

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