Mother, any distance

SUMMARY

Mother, anything that's longer than a single wingspan needs two people to measure it. You come over to help me take measurements of my new house's windows, frames, and doors; to help me measure the walls that feel like they take up acres, and the floors that feel as big as prairies.

You hold the tape measure at the starting end while I unfurl it, taking note of various measurements and relaying all these meters and centimeters back to you at home base. I walk up the stairs, the tape measure extending further, stretching out between us like the years of our relationship. This makes me think of an anchor and a kite.

I walk like an astronaut through the empty rooms of my house, before climbing up the ladder up to the attic. The tape measure is stretched out as far as it can go by now, to the point that it'll snap if pulled any further. You're two floors below me, gripping the other end of the tape measure tightly with your fingers as close to the tape's base as possible. I reach towards the attic window, which looks out on a seemingly limitless sky. Out there, I will either fail or succeed.

THEMES

MOTHERS AND CHILDREN

In Armitage's poem, an unnamed speaker is taking measurements of the windows, doors, walls, and so on of a new home. The speaker's mother has come to help, holding one end of the tape measure as the speaker goes around the house. Throughout the poem, the mother and speaker are presented as both literally and metaphorically connected—and the poem implies that this connection always has been and always will be there. The poem, then, is a kind of tribute the power and importance of a relationship as old as humanity itself: that between mothers and children.

The poem demonstrates this bond through the use of metaphor. The "spool of tape" (i.e., the tape measure) that unfurls between the speaker and mother as they measure the house is perhaps a reference to the umbilical cord, the original connection between the two. Though the umbilical cord is cut at birth, what it *represents* remains true: that mother and child will always be linked together (even after the speaker moves out and gets a new house!).

As the speaker moves around measuring various aspects of the house, the poem also likens the tape measure to the string that connects a kite to its anchor. The speaker is like the kite, emboldened to explore knowing that their mother is back on the ground, holding the other end of the figurative string. The speaker's mother is thus akin to the anchor in this scenario, a constant presence offering comfort and security even as the speaker wanders far from home.

There comes a time, though, when the speaker reaches a "breaking point, where something has to give." In literal terms, the tape measure connecting mother and child has stretched as far as it can go; on a more symbolic level, the speaker is saying that it's time to leave the comfort of the nest, and to either "fall or fly"—to succeed or fail—independently. The speaker understands that people must eventually grow up and that their mother won't always be around, but the poem suggests that the mark she has left on her child will endure. Her love and support have granted the speaker the confidence to try to stand on their own two feet—to create a home of their own.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-15

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

Mother, any distance ...
... of the floors.

The opening two lines state the poem's premise. Put most literally, the poem is about the speaker needing help setting up a new house. Specifically, the speaker needs another person there to hold onto the other end of a tape measure while the speaker goes around and measures various parts of the house—likely in order to get furniture and decor that'll make the empty rooms feel more homey. Notice how the opening line itself is stretched by enjambment ("single span / requires a second ..."); it's as if it, too, is "greater than a single span" and as such requires a "second pair of hands"—or, rather, a second line in the poem—to be completed.

There is, of course, a whole world of meaning beyond this literal set-up, as the poem will go on to explore the enduring power of the relationships between mothers and their children. Even in this first stanza, though, it's clear that the speaker is still leaning on their mother for help despite being old enough to have a house of their own (note that we're using "they" for the speaker throughout this guide because no gender is mentioned in the poem).

The speaker's mother, for her part, appears in the poem almost as soon as the speaker makes it clear that her help is needed

(the first line of the poem is in fact a moment of apostrophe). Given their apparent closeness, it's fair to assume that the speaker grew up with their mother in the family household. Perhaps this is the speaker's first time living away from home, and perhaps that's part of why the mother can be so helpful in this situation—she has experience of setting up a new house, and of turning a house into a home.

In lines 3 and 4, the speaker goes on to enumerates all the different things that need to be measured:

> ... windows, pelmets, doors,
> the acres of the walls, the prairies of the floors.

It's a daunting task for the speaker, with the length of the list of items to be measure showing how much there is to be done. Furthermore, the lack of conjunctions like "and" in this sentence—a device technically called asyndeton—demonstrates the way in which the process feels almost endless. Indeed, the speaker exaggerates the size of the task by using metaphor too: "acres" and "prairies" relate to measurements of land, not walls. Accordingly, they relate to much larger distance than the ones actually being measured in this poem—but it helps relay the way that the speaker feels relatively out of their depth, metaphorically not yet ready to relinquish their mother's comforting support.

LINES 5-8

> *You at the ...*
> *... us. Anchor. Kite.*

There are two distinct levels of meaning happening in the second stanza. On the surface level, this section recounts the process of measuring up the house. The speaker's mother is "at the zero-end"—literally, the start of the tape measure—while the speaker unfurls the "spool of tape" and reports various measurements "back to base." On a more figurative level, the speaker's mother is positioned like an anchor at the beginning of the speaker's life, while the speaker moves forward through the years, growing up—knowing all the while that the speaker remains connected to home "base."

The speaker keeps rolling out the tap measure, heading up stairs with "the line still feeding out, / unreeling years between us." If it wasn't clear already, it's now apparent how the measuring tape is a metaphor for the enduring connection between the speaker and their mother. As an image, it closely mirrors the way that mothers and children are connected even before the latter are born, joined together by the umbilical cord. This section shows that, despite the "years" that have gone by, the speaker still feels that connection to be there. Of course, it has changed in many ways, but the fundamentals of it—love, connection, and care—remain the same. The assonance between "feeding" and "unreeling" has a sort of stretched-out sound, conveying the increasing length of the tape measure (and the increasing years over which the speaker and mother have been connected).

As if the poem is increasingly occupying a metaphorical realm, line 8 offers two one-word sentences which are both metaphors for the tape measure *and* the interconnectedness between mother and child. The "Anchor" relates to security and stability, which the mother has given to the speaker's life. The "Kite" speaks more to the idea that a child, at some point, has to be allowed to fly (to fly the nest, perhaps). The child remains connected to the mother, of course, but they also must go off and live their own life. The kite image perhaps also functions as an impression of a childhood memory, reminding the reader that, though the speaker is now an adult, they will always be their mother's child.

The numerous caesuras in this section (every line features at least two commas) give the reader a sense of this long line of tape measure being unfurled, clause by clause, word by word. And as with lines 3 and 4, the poem again uses asyndeton here (for instance: "metres, centimetres" in line 6). By removing the conjunctions (like "and") that the reader might expect, the length of tape feels like it might be endless. Every line in this stanza also features enjambment, the words cascading down the page like an unspooling thread—or, maybe, a tape measure. Indeed, the stanza it runs in almost continuous sentence from start to its end, stopping for breath only at the full stop caesura in line 8 after "us."

LINES 9-11

> *I space-walk through ...*
> *... has to give;*

Instead of just walking through the empty bedrooms, the speaker "space-walk[s]." This subtle metaphor is where the poem probably takes a departure from its literal set-up. That is, it's hard to see why the speaker would need to measure the entirety of the house—with their mother still presumably in the same place downstairs. (That said, it's not entirely impossible!)

Regardless, the use of "space" indicates the way the tape measure is unfurled slowly, and, like the mention of "Kite," is perhaps a subtle reference to some childhood interest. The rooms are empty because the house is new, but also because the speaker is traveling back through their memory, and perhaps recalling different houses lived in with their mother.

As with stanzas one and two, the poem here uses caesura and asyndeton to bring to life an image of seemingly endless stretchiness—it's not clear to the reader where the sentence is going to settle and come to rest:

> ... empty bedrooms, climb
> the ladder to the loft, to breaking point, where
> something
> has to give;

The enjambment here also contributes to this constantly unfolding length. It's important to remember that the poem has already set-up the connection between the tape measure and the interpersonal connection between the speaker and their mother. The enjambment in line 9 specifically also suspends the sense of "climb," adding a moment of tension to match the increasing tautness of the tape measure, now reaching "breaking point."

Of course, the mention of a "breaking point" is the speaker's way of admitting that the mother-child relationship cannot endure forever—but only because nothing lasts forever. Eventually, something will have "to give." Indeed, the abrupt shortness of line 11 suggests this, suddenly relieving the tension of the poem's long lines. It's a visual representation of the fact that the tape measure can go no further.

LINES 12-15

two floors below ...
... fall or fly.

Lines 12-15 offer up the poem's closing metaphorical image. Having ascended the "ladder to the loft," the tape measure held between the speaker and their mother is now at its "breaking point." The mother is "two floors below." It does seem unlikely that this is grounded in reality—it's hard to see why the speaker would need this measurement—and so it's reasonable to see this section primarily as a continuation of the metaphor started in lines 7 and 8 ("unreeling the years between us").

The poem uses a tight-sounding /i/ assonance to bring to life the way that the mother is pinching her end of the tape measure:

> ... fingertips still pinch
> the last one-hundredth of an inch...I reach

In addition to this assonance, these lines are also full of /n/ consonance (also highlighted above). The effect of these two combined is that they grip the lines, perhaps conveying the way in which the mother will ultimately never let go of her connection to her child. The alliteration of "floors" and "fingertips" achieves a similar effect.

The poem then ends on a kind of cliffhanger. Reaching the hatch in the loft, the speaker perceives the "endless sky," perhaps itself a metaphor for the future. They see themselves presented with two options: falling or flying. This refers to an expression about parenthood and childhood, the moment when a child "flies the nest." Like a bird, this process can succeed or fail (indeed, perhaps now it becomes fair to assume that this is the first time the speaker has lived away from their family home). The bird may fly, or they may fall and have to try again. Either way, they can only go through this process of trial and error because their mother has given them the support and strength to even try—and, of course, the mother bird sets the example of flight in the first place. Likewise, children become adults and carry with them the experience of seeing their own parents as adults in the world. To heighten the ending's suspense, the enjambment from line 14 to 15 ("sky / to fall or fly") momentarily makes it unclear how the poem will close.

It's also worth noting here that the poem has *almost* conformed to a sonnet shape, with two quatrains (stanzas with four lines) and a closing sestet (a stanza with six lines). Except, of course, the third stanza actually has seven lines, not six (like a sestet). This extra line itself conveys the line that connects the speaker and the mother. It's not possible to point to one of the lines and say that it is the extra one, but the fact that there are seven and not six speaks to the interconnectedness of the speaker and their mother.

SYMBOLS

THE MEASURING TAPE

The poem's set-up is based on a rather simple and mundane fact: the speaker can't stretch a tape measure long enough to measure all the various elements of their new house. That, of course, provides a reason for the speaker to call on their mother for help; she holds one end of the tape measure for the speaker. At first, the tape measure maintains this sense of just being a practical tool. The speaker and mother unfurl the tape, making notes of various dimensions as they move around the house. But the speaker themselves starts to see the symbolic significance of the tape as the poem progresses, noticing the way that it seems to represent the mother-child bond.

Accordingly, the tape measure becomes more symbolic the further it stretches out (perhaps, the further that it stretches away from its literal meaning). By line 8, the measure no longer merely "unreels" its physical length, but the "years between" the mother and the speaker. This connection is gently suggestive of the very first connection shared between the two: the umbilical cord. In turn, this reminds the reader that the mother has cared for the speaker even before the latter was born—and thus strengthens the poem's message about the enduring, ancient, and perhaps even mystical connection between mothers and their children.

Finally, the way that the tape measure stretches to "breaking point" is significant too. It suggests that, on some level, the speaker needs to let go of their dependency on their mother in order to gain their independence (a process which they seem to be already undergoing).

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- Lines 5-8

- Lines 9-13

THE ANCHOR

The anchor in the poem represents the speaker's mother. Anchors are associated with safety and security, two things which the speaker's mother appears to have provided—and perhaps continues to provide—for the speaker. Anchors steady ships, just as mothers steady their children. In keeping with this idea, the mother in the poem stays two floors below as the speaker climbs up into the loft; she is secure and planted as the speaker (who is represented by the kite) climbs toward the sky.

Of course, at a certain point, anchors also are meant to hold things *back*; they prevent ships from floating away or being carried off by the winds and tides. As comforting as the speaker's mother may be, then, comparing her to an anchor suggests that the speaker can never be truly independent while tethered to a parent.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 8:** "Anchor"

THE KITE

Whereas an anchor is planted on the ground, a kite is airborne in the sky; it's an object that can fly above the earth while still being connected to the ground by a string. As such, it represents the speaker as they are throughout much of the poem: a person *starting* to go off on their own, but who is still tethered to an anchor—in this case, to their mother, relying on her help and support. The mention of a kite here also anticipates the poem's final moment, in which the speaker confronts the choice before them: flying or falling. It's also worth noting that the kite is an object focused on fun and play. Perhaps this speaks to childhood itself, and to the way in which mothers try to raise their children in happy and nurturing environments.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 8:** "Kite"

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

"Mother, any distance" uses alliteration sparingly, meaning it feels all the more powerful when it does appear. The first example is in lines 1 and 2:

> ... distance greater than a single span
> requires a second pair of hands.

This /s/ sound works subtly here, but gives the lines a sort of stretchy feeling; the /s/ sound "spans" across both lines (an effect bolstered by the consonance of "distance"), anticipating the poem's central image of the tape measure.

Another important moment of alliteration appears in line 6, when the speaker relates how the mother is noting down the measurements as the speaker unfurls the "spool of tape." The speaker characterizes this as "reporting metres, centimetres back to base." The precision of the two /b/ sounds gently evokes the process that the mother and speaker are undertaking—they're trying to take precise measurements of the house. The alliteration here also focuses readers' attention on this phrase, which positions the mother as a steady, anchoring home "base" for the speaker.

Lines 9 to 10 use alliteration too with the phrase "climb / the ladder to the loft." The three /l/ sounds function like rungs on the ladder, distinct stages in the lines as they unfolds (in the same way that rungs are spaced out regularly on a ladder). Perhaps the most evocative use of alliteration, though, occurs in line 15, the poem's closing line. Here, the speaker feels that they have two options going forward: they can either "fall" or "fly." The alliteration demonstrates how, though these two options bring entirely different results, the actual process in both is very similar (in that both involve leaving the "nest," as it were, and stepping out on one's own). This effect is supported by the /l/ sound consonance of these words as well.

Also note how the /f/ alliteration in the final line of the poem echoes that which appears in line 12 with "floors" and "fingertips." This former phrase is associated with the mother pinching the final bit of the tape measure as the speaker climbs up to the house's loft. As such, the alliteration of /f/ sounds once again at the end of the poem subtly suggests the strength of the relationship between mother and child; their connection is evoked via sound even as the speaker prepares to step out on their own.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "s," "s," "p"
- **Line 2:** "s," "p"
- **Line 3:** "m," "m"
- **Line 5:** "r"
- **Line 6:** "r," "b," "b"
- **Line 7:** "st," "st"
- **Line 9:** "l"
- **Line 10:** "l," "l"
- **Line 12:** "f," "f"
- **Line 15:** "f," "f"

ASSONANCE

As the poem really only centers on one main image—the speaker and mother unfurling a tape measure—a number of the poetic devices are used to convey a sense of something being stretched out to "breaking point" (line 10). That's where assonance comes in, first cropping up in across lines 1 and 2:

> ... any distance greater than a single span
> requires a second pair of hands.

The /a/ sound here (like the /s/ sound as discussed in our entry on alliteration) seems to "span" across the lines, reflecting the sheer breadth of the distance being discussed. (The /a/ sound also echoes in "distance" and "pair," which may or may not be truly assonant depending on how readers pronounce them.)

Adding to this stretching effect are the many long /e/ sounds that crop up throughout the second stanza:

> ... recording
> length, reporting metres, centimetres ... leaving
> the line still feeding out, unreeling
> years between us. ...

The other main example of assonance appears in lines 12 and 13:

> ... your fingertips still pinch
> the last one-hundredth of an inch ...

These short, sharp /i/ vowels seem to almost grip the line, creating an aural equivalent of what the lines are describing (the mother tightly pinching the tape measure as it stretches to its breaking point).

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "a," "a," "a"
- **Line 2:** "a"
- **Line 3:** "e," "ea," "e," "e"
- **Line 5:** "e"
- **Line 6:** "e," "e," "e," "ea"
- **Line 7:** "ee," "ee"
- **Line 8:** "ea," "e," "ee"
- **Line 12:** "i," "i," "i," "i"
- **Line 13:** "i"

ASYNDETON

Asyndeton is used in all three of the poem's stanzas. The poem's sentences contain a lot of clauses, which usually might be also be connected by conjunctions (words like "and" and "or"). Though the word itself (asyndeton) is derived from the Greek meaning *unconnected*, the poem actually uses this technique for the opposite effect as the speaker and mother go through the speaker's new home, connecting wall to wall and floor to floor through the tape measure. There is a lot to measure—a seemingly endless amount—and the asyndeton means that, in those moments when the poem plays out its numerous clauses, it's hard to know when the sentence is going to end. Lines 3 and 4 are a good example:

> ... windows, pelmets, doors,
> the acres of the walls, the prairies of the floors.

An "and" before "the prairies" would signal the end of this list—but instead it feels as if the speaker could have gone on and on. Likewise, the asyndeton in the second stanza ("You at the zero-end ... years between us) conveys the numerous measurements and movements that the speaker and mother make as they move through the house—also evoking the way that the speaker increasingly perceives the metaphorical significance of what they are doing.

Indeed, it's only in line 12 ("two floors below ..."), when the speaker comes to a stop by the window in the loft, that the asyndeton recedes. This shows how the speaker and their mother have pulled the tape measure to breaking point, and that the speaker faces a choice about the future: whether to "fall or fly."

Where Asyndeton appears in the poem:

- Lines 3-4
- Lines 5-8
- Lines 9-11

CAESURA

The lines in the poem often feature multiple clauses, and as such caesura is used throughout. Essentially, the poem has one main image from which the rest of the poem grows: the speaker and the mother unfurling the tape measure as they move around the speaker's new home. To match this image, the poem deliberately creates a sense of being stretched out across its lines through its combination of caesura, enjambment, and asyndeton. To this end, caesuras are used to balance different clauses within sentences, the sentences' meaning unfolding in stages and mirroring the action of the speaker and mother. This effect is used in all three stanzas. For instance, take the first:

> ... windows, pelmets, doors,
> the acres of the walls, the prairies of the floors.

The way the caesuras help the speaker enumerate all the different things that they want to measure make the task seem daunting and almost endless. And the caesuras are used to the same effect in the following stanza ("You at the zero-end ... Kite."), in which every line features at least two caesuras. The

caesura in the last line of this stanza is a little different though:

> years between us. Anchor. Kite.

These two full-stop caesuras—the only ones to appear in the poem—function more as a kind of jumping-off point for the speaker's imagination, as they compare the speaker and mother to an anchor and a kite. The period after "us" allows a moment of rest after the tumbling enjambment of the previous lines, during which the speaker seems to take stock of the metaphorical significance of measuring the house together.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Mother, any"
- **Line 3:** "windows, pelmets, doors"
- **Line 4:** "walls, the"
- **Line 5:** "zero-end, me," "tape, recording"
- **Line 6:** "length, reporting metres, centimetres," "base, then"
- **Line 7:** "stairs, the," "out, unreeling"
- **Line 8:** "us. Anchor. Kite"
- **Line 9:** "bedrooms, climb"
- **Line 10:** "loft, to," "point, where"
- **Line 13:** "inch...I"

CONSONANCE

Consonance is a subtle but consistent presence throughout "Mother, any distance." As with a number of the poem's other devices, it's used in part to give the poem a stretched-out kind of sound, fitting with the central image of the speaker and mother extending a tape measure as they move around the house. This type of consonance is first used in lines 1 and 2, where /s/ and /n/ sounds in particular echo throughout the lines:

> ... any distance greater than a single span
> requires a second pair of hands.

This, plus the assonance of the /a/ sound in words like "than" and "span," creates the sensation of sound being draped across the lines, stretching from one end to the next.

A particularly striking moment of consonance comes in line 8, at the end of the second stanza, with: "Anchor. Kite." Here, the speaker pauses to reflect on the metaphorical significance of measuring the house. In this summation, the speaker's mother is compared to an anchor—the home "base" that the speaker is connected to—while the speaker is the "kite." The shared hard /k/ sound in these words emphasizes the connection via mother and speaker through sound, as the mother's presence, in a way, appears even as the speaker wanders off as a "kite."

The other key example of consonance is in lines 12 and 13, with the intense repetition of /n/ and /ch/ sounds:

> .... still pinch
> the last one-hundredth of an inch...I reach
> towards a hatch ...

Both are rather constricting sounds, requiring the tongue to stick to the roof of the mouth. They thus add a subtle sense of a tightening grip to these lines, mimicking the way that the mother is pinching the tape measure.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "n," "s," "n," "n," "s," "s," "n"
- **Line 2:** "r," "r," "s," "s," "r," "s"
- **Line 3:** "m," "m," "m," "s," "s," "s"
- **Line 4:** "s," "s," "s," "s"
- **Line 5:** "p," "p," "r," "n," "g"
- **Line 6:** "n," "g," "r," "r," "t," "ng," "m," "tr," "m," "tr," "b," "b"
- **Line 7:** "st," "st"
- **Line 8:** "ch," "K"
- **Line 9:** "cl"
- **Line 10:** "l," "l," "t"
- **Line 12:** "f," "l," "f," "n," "ch"
- **Line 13:** "n," "n," "n," "n," "ch," "ch"
- **Line 14:** "tch," "n," "n," "n," "n," "l," "ss," "s"
- **Line 15:** "f," "ll," "f," "l"

ENJAMBMENT

"Mother, any distance" uses enjambment to great effect. Out of the poem's 15 lines, 9 are enjambed. It's part of the poem's overall aim to give its lines a stretched-out feel, the lines seeming to unravel down the page just as the speaker unspools the tape measure (an effect which is also achieved through caesura and asyndeton, as we discuss in those device entries).

Enjambment first appears in the poem's opening line. Here, the speaker is describing a certain type of distance that "requires a second pair of hands" in order to measure it (because it is too wide/long for line a single person to measure on their own). The sentence itself "spans" across two lines, mirroring the distance to which they refer:

> ... greater than a single span
> requires a second pair ...

The first three lines of the second stanza are all enjambed as well. Fittingly, this stanza describes the actual actions of the speaker and mother as they measure the speaker's new home. They extend the tape measure as they go, and the lines follow suit, "unreeling" across the stanza through the use of enjambment. Enjambment at the start of the third stanza, in lines 9-11, works similarly.

But the enjambment of the poem's final four lines functions a

bit differently, creating a sense of building anticipation as the speaker climbs farther away from the mother. The lines quickly spill into each other as the measuring tape is also stretched to its "breaking point." The lines feel precarious, as if they might topple over into the white space that separates them. This mirrors the speaker's unnerving sense of freedom in the final line, as the speaker reaches the "endless sky" and is faced with the possibility of falling or flying.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "span"
- **Line 2:** "requires"
- **Line 5:** "recording"
- **Line 6:** "length," " leaving"
- **Line 7:** "up," "unreeling"
- **Line 8:** "years"
- **Line 9:** "climb"
- **Line 10:** "the"
- **Line 11:** "has"
- **Line 12:** "pinch"
- **Line 13:** "the," "reach"
- **Line 14:** "towards," "sky"
- **Line 15:** "to"

METAPHOR

"Mother, any distance" is essentially a poem of two worlds: the literal and the metaphorical. On the surface of it, a mother comes to help her adult child measure up their (the child's) new home, probably so that it can be decorated and filled with furniture. But this realistic set-up takes on increasingly metaphorical importance throughout, coming to represent the relationship and lasting connection between the speaker and their mother.

This metaphorical shift begins in line 8, when the "line" "unreel[s]" not just the line itself but also the "years" between the speaker and their mother. Suddenly, the poem seems more open to surreal and figurative interpretation. The "Anchor" and "Kite" are both metaphors for the tape measure *and* the mother-child relationship, both relating to security and calm, but with the "Kite" also hinting at the importance of the child finding their own independence.

There are other, related metaphors throughout the poem as well. In the first stanza, "acres" and "prairies" are used to measure large swaths of land, not walls, and their usage here reveal that the speaker feels overwhelmed by the task at hand. "Space-walk" (line 9) is also metaphorical, and relates to the careful way the speaker walks through the house in order to make their measurements. It also perhaps relates to a childhood interest (space is a common fascination for children). Finally, the poem's closing lines use metaphor as well. The speaker, like a young bird leaving its nest, is faced with a choice: "to fall or fly." Of course, they intend to neither in reality, but the choice metaphorically represents the idea that the speaker's independence could result in failure or success.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "the acres of the walls, the prairies of the floors."
- **Lines 7-8:** "the line still feeding out, unreeling / years between us. Anchor. Kite."
- **Line 9:** "I space-walk "
- **Lines 13-15:** "I reach / towards a hatch that opens on an endless sky / to fall or fly."

VOCABULARY

Span (Line 1) - The distance between one end of something and the other, here referring to the speaker's hands (arm span).

Pelmets (Line 3) - Pelmets are structures above windows that hide curtain fixtures.

Acres (Line 4) - An acre is a measurement of land equivalent to 43,560 square feet. The speaker is exaggerating about the size of the walls in the house, which seem big because the speaker can't measure them alone.

Prairies (Line 4) - A prairie is large area of grassland.

Zero-end (Line 5) - This relates to the tape measure stretched out between the speaker and their mother. The zero-end is simply the starting end of the tape measure.

Spool (Line 5) - A spool is a reel around which something is wound, in this case the tape measure.

Unreeling (Line 7) - This refers to the way the tape unfurls from its spool as the speaker walks further away from the mother.

Space-walk (Line 9) - This is referring to the way an astronaut walks outside of their spacecraft, kept attached by a cord (just like a child is attached to a mother in the womb!).

Loft (Line 10) - This is a room that is part of a house's roof structure.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Mother, any distance" appears in Simon Armitage's collection, *A Book of Matches*. This is a sequence of sonnets, which is a good starting-point for a discussion of this poem's form. On first glance, this poem seems to conform fairly well to the sonnet form. The first eight lines are divided into two quatrains—so far, so sonnet.

But usually these two quatrains—collectively known as an octave or octet—would be followed by a six-line stanza (a sestet). Here, the poem diverges from the sonnet form,

containing seven lines in its final section. Perhaps the "extra" line is there to represent the connection between the speaker and mother, who are joined by the tape measure and, more importantly, by their enduring bond.

METER

When it comes to meter and rhyme, "Mother, any distance" is an unusual poem. Though written in free verse, the meter it still often quite evocative.

Take the first line of the poem, for instance, which is made up of trochees (stressed-unstressed):

> Mother, | any | distance | greater | than a | single | span

The next two have a clear iambic pattern, meaning they're filled with poetic feet that follow an unstressed-stressed syllable pattern:

> requires | a sec- | ond pair | of hands.
> You come | to help | me mea- | sure win- | dows, pel- | mets, doors,

In both cases, though, the rhythm has a sort of bouncy regularity to the way it unfolds, with a pretty much 1:1 correlation between stressed and unstressed syllables (that is, there are never two unstressed or two stressed syllables in a row).

The final line in this stanza then has a strange meter that could be broken down as iamb-spondee-iamb; more important than labeling here is pointing out that the rhythm repeats exactly in each clause on either side of the caesura:

> the acres of the walls,
> the prairies of the floors.

The addition of more unstressed syllables here imbues the line with a sense of space that noticeably contrasts with the prior two lines, reflecting the fact that the distances being described are huge. Indeed, the metaphorical use of "acres" and "prairies" underscores how daunting this measuring task feels to the speaker.

The first line of the next stanza is similar to the last line of the first stanza, in that the phrases immediately to either side of the caesura have the exact same rhythm:

> You at the zero-end,
> me with the spool of tape

The first of these phrases refers to the mother ("you"), and the second to the speaker ("me"). As such, their identical rhythm suggests the enduring connection between the two.

Much of the second stanza is then again trochaic. For example:

> length, re- | porting | metres, | centi- | metres | back to | base, then | leaving
> up the | stairs, the | line still | feeding | out, un- | reeling

This steadiness is again in keeping with the unfurling of the tape measure, section by section, step by step.

Elsewhere, the poem makes important use of variations in line length. Line 11 is very short, conveying the way that something "has to give" (in this case the line length!). And the final line—"to fall or fly"—shows the simple choice that lies ahead in the speaker's future. Like a bird flying the nest, their independence will either work or it won't.

RHYME SCHEME

The first quatrain seems to set the poem up as a typical sonnet, rhyming AABB (span/hands and doors/floors). This gives the reader a false expectation of how the poem will unfold, though, since the rhyme scheme doesn't continue to follow this pattern. Stanza two, for instance, doesn't rhyme very strongly. The first three lines do indeed end with the same syllable—"ing"—but the sound is subtle and unstressed. Even so, this shows the repetitive nature of the speaker's and their mother's movements, as they measure up the house and make note of the distances.

Stanza three doesn't rhyme at all, until the last two lines. There's a bit of internal rhyme here, of course, with "still pinch / the last one-hundredth of an inch," which draws emphasis to the mother's actions—to the fact that she is clinging onto the final bits of the tape measure as it's stretched to its "breaking point." The final two lines then have clear, full rhymes with sky/fly, making the ending of the poem actually conform to a regular sonnet; putting aside the mismatched line lengths, these final lines make up a couplet. This, in turn, gives the poem's last moments an air of finality.

SPEAKER

The poem's first-person speaker is relatively undefined in "Mother, any distance." However, it's clear that this person is an adult and is moving into a new home, possibly their first one since living with their mother. The speaker clearly values their relationship with their mother, calling in the first line for her to come and lend a hand (literally and figuratively!). Note that no gender is given in the poem, so the speaker might be male or female (the poem isn't necessarily autobiographical). While no age is given, the speaker is likely someone in relatively early adulthood, given that their mother is still alive and willing to help out.

The speaker is also attuned to the metaphorical implications of

the moments shared with their mother during this seemingly banal situation. The tape measure stands in for their enduring bond, and is also reminiscent of the umbilical cord that once joined them together. And as the poem goes on, and the speaker feels the magnitude of the moment more and more, the speaker's language becomes increasingly figurative. At the end, the speaker frames their future in a metaphor that refers to birds having to fly their nest. The speaker knows that they now must either "fall or fly"—that is, that they must try to stand on their own two feet.

SETTING

The poem takes place within the speaker's new house, which at the moment is bare—undecorated and unfurnished. In a way, the emptiness of the house represents the potential of the speaker's future; the speaker now has a chance to turn this particular house into a comforting home (perhaps like the one the speaker's mother created for the speaker as a child). The speaker moves throughout the house's various rooms, before heading up a ladder to the loft or attic and looking out a window.

Of course, this setting has metaphorical connotations too, in that it is a representation of the relationship between the mother and speaker. This is particularly noticeable in the way the speaker mentions the "years" "unreeling" between them while measuring various parts of the house. When the speaker later looks out of the house's loft window at a clear and "endless" sky, this is meant to reflect where the speaker is in life—that is, the speaker is at a critical moment in which they must step out on their own, either to "fall or fly."

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Simon Armitage is one of the U.K.'s most popular contemporary poets. He was born in Yorkshire in 1963 and began writing poetry at a young age. His first collection, *Zoom!*, was published by Bloodaxe in 1989 and was an immediate success, selling well and being shortlisted for the Whitbread Poetry Award.

Armitage's poems are known for their dark comedy, clarity, and playfulness; for their apparent simplicity that hides complex emotional worlds. This accessibility perhaps explains, in part, why his poems are so popular—with perhaps only Seamus Heaney's ("Mid-Term Break") as widely read in recent years. Armitage's work shows the influence of other important 20th century poets like Ted Hughes ("Hawk Roosting") and W.H. Auden.

Mothers themselves are a well-established subject for poetry too. "A Practical Mom" by Amy Uyematsu makes for interesting comparison, also using a mother's skill at certain types of labor as a way into discussing the mother-child relationship. Sylvia Plath's "Morning Song" is a poem that looks more specifically at the connection between a mother and her child when the latter is still a baby, while Philip Larkin's "Mother, Summer, I" is a bittersweet look at the way people inherit certain traits from their parents.

Armitage is the current serving Poet Laureate of England, having taken over from Carol Ann Duffy ("War Photographer," "In Mrs Tilscher's Class"). This is technically ceremonial role, the original responsibility being to compose poems on significant occasions (e.g. the birth of a royal baby). Nowadays, the Laureate tends to focus on furthering poetry's audience, particularly within an educational context—the kind of work that Armitage has been doing for many years.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"Mother, any distance" was published in 1993, but it doesn't really specify a timeframe for its setting. That said, it certainly *feels* contemporary. The new house occupied by the speaker has a fairly suburban feel to it, particularly with the inclusion of a loft. And, of course, young men and women are more likely nowadays to buy and furnish new houses on their own than they were in, say, Elizabethan England! That said, in a way, this non-specific sense of time is part of the poem's strategy. The poem is about the relationship between the speaker and their own mother, but it's also about the mother-child relationship more generally—and this is a connection as old as humanity itself. In that sense, the non-specific historical setting speaks to the power of the mother-child bond to endure.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Armitage's Life and Work — A valuable resource from the Poetry Foundation, with more poems and biographical information about Armitage. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/simon-armitage)
- Mother's Day Poems — A fine selection of other poems that also look at the mother-child relationship. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/68655/mothers-day-poems-56d2484336db6)
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- Walking Home — An interesting discussion with Armitage about his book Walking Home. (https://www.on-magazine.co.uk/arts/arts-interviews/simon-armitage/)
- The Poem Read by the Man Himself — Simon Armitage reads "Mother, any distance." (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qO9PnHp6R1U)

- Poetry as Dissent — Armitage discusses the "obstinate nature of poetry" in this video interview with The Guardian. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TvFcbedyQ0A)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER SIMON ARMITAGE POEMS

- Remains
- The Manhunt

HOW TO CITE

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