

# An Easy Passage



## SUMMARY

When the girl is halfway up the roof over the porch of her parents' house, hunkered low and shivering in her two-piece swimsuit, she's trying not to think about how thin the windowsill is or how steep a fall from the stairwell would be. Instead, she tries to focus on her friend, whom she's kind of in love with and who is watching from the pale pebbles below. The girl tries to focus on this friend and on the window, which is ajar, and the window's fragile metal handle that, in just a minute, she'll thrust her entire body towards, pressing herself against the sunny side of the house for stability. Before doing that, though, she braces herself, still squatting on the porch roof that's like a piece of fossilized shoreline, its kernels of pavement scorching her feet and hands. In this crouched position, her small bust barely brushes against the top of her thighs. This girl has no idea, the speaker says, about the way the world stops accepting people the bigger they get. Because at this moment, both the girl and her friend seem to emit a glow, from their hair to the small gold earrings the first is wearing. At this moment, the road stretches out like a long, gray eye, and the girl's mother, who won't give her daughter a key to the house, is nowhere near. The girls are far away from the employees working in the dreary chrome factory across the street, and even farther from the blushing administrative assistant who, dreaming of some night course she is going to take, or some great vacation she's going to go on, glances from the riveting portents of magazine horoscopes towards a girl—who looks to be no older than thirteen—standing practically naked in the driveway across the street, one hand pressed to her belly, the other protecting her eyes against the sun as she stares up at a white leg with a silver chain around its ankle and at five toenails deftly painted the color of sparkling oyster shells, which, while the girl's foot is outstretched, momentarily reflect the daylight, like flashes of gunfire, until they fall nimbly into the darkness of the house.

somewhere else. In this way, the poem expresses nostalgia for adolescence and its blooming sense of freedom, daring, and possibility—which, the poem implies, get dampened by the predictability and constriction of adulthood.

Adolescence, in this poem, is a time of uncertainty that is both dangerous and exhilarating. Having snuck out with her friend, the girl is now “trembling” on the “porch roof” of her house, scared of making the wrong move and tumbling to the ground below. She knows that what she's doing is dangerous, but she's also thrumming with the excitement of being “half in love” with her friend and breaking the rules set by her mother, who “doesn't trust her [] with a key.” The precariousness of her situation has her laser-focused and feeling “lit, as if from within.” In other words, the danger and uncertainty add intensity to the moment, making her feel more alive.

On a [symbolic](#) level, the girl's tricky journey back through the window of her house represents the line she is getting ready to cross from adolescence into adulthood. Her being “halfway there” and getting ready to “lean in” with the “length of her whole body” suggests that she's on the cusp of adulthood and getting ready to make a major transition.

In contrast to the exhilaration of adolescence, the poem paints adulthood as dreary and dull. Across the street from the girls, “workers [are going] about their business.” The stark contrast of the girls' colorful struggle with the “drab” (or dull) “electroplating factory” suggests that adulthood is less precarious than adolescence, but also less interesting.

Also contrasting with the girls is the “flush-faced secretary” who is dreaming of something more stimulating than the work she's currently performing—be it a “night class” or “the trip of a lifetime,” or even some hint of excitement in the “astrology column” of a magazine. Basically, she's looking for anything that will add a little zest to her life.

By illustrating how vastly different the girls' lives are compared to the monotonous adult world grinding on around them, the poem hints at a longing for the intensity of adolescence. The image of the girl's “shimmering [...] toenails” which “catch the sunlight briefly” before disappearing “into the shade of the house” suggests how fleeting the vivacity of adolescence is. The speaker asks, “What can [the teenage girl] know / of the way the world admits us less and less / the more we grow?” In other words, the speaker suggests that growing up isn't “an easy passage”—and that the girls are lucky to be blissfully unaware of the disappointments that await them.

### Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-38



## THEMES



### ADOLESCENCE VS. ADULTHOOD

“An Easy Passage” follows a teenage girl's precarious climb as she tries to sneak back into her house, contrasting her exciting and perilous struggle with the monotonous routines of adulthood. The girl might be in danger of getting hurt or in trouble, but she's also exploring her sense of agency and pushing boundaries. Meanwhile, the lives of nearby adults are marked by dreary certainty and a desire to be



## LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

## LINES 1-2

*Once she is ...  
... family's house, trembling,*

The poem grabs the reader's attention right away, not wasting any time in creating tension and suspense: a girl is climbing "the porch roof of her family's house." The fact that the girl is "crouched in her bikini" suggests that she snuck out to go swimming, and the fact that she is "halfway up" rather than halfway down reveals that she's not on her way out, but is rather now trying to get back inside without being noticed.

That "halfway up there" has [symbolic](#) resonance as well. The girl isn't just halfway up the roof, but also halfway between childhood and adulthood. Readers will learn later that the girl is 13 years old, and thus is entering adolescence. She's no longer just a child, but also isn't yet a fully grown adult.

The house feels symbolic here as well: it's not "the girl's" house but "her family's," a phrase that implies two things:

1. The house is a place of familiarity and comfort. It's linked with family and the security of childhood.
2. The house makes her feel stifled and restricted. She doesn't entirely belong there, because she is no longer just a child.

The [imagery](#) of the girl "trembling," meanwhile, suggests both the physical stress that her body is under as she tries to keep her balance as well as the fear and anxiety she feels about getting caught.

## LINES 3-8

*she knows that ...  
... somewhere beneath her,*

The speaker says that the girl has to do everything she can not to "think / of the narrow windowsill, the sharp / drop of the stairwell." In other words, thinking about the dangers at hand—the possibility of falling from the roof—is only going to freak her out.

Of course, trying specifically not to think of something often has the opposite effect! And the staccato /p/ [consonance](#) in "sharp / drop" might even subtly evoke the very thing she's trying not to think of: the sound of her body falling and hitting a hard surface.

Instead of thinking about this unpleasant possibility, the speaker says, the girl needs to "keep her mind / on the friend with whom she is half in love." Perhaps the girl has romantic feelings for her friend "waiting for her on the blond" (or pale, light-colored) "gravel somewhere beneath her," or perhaps the speaker is simply referencing the intensity of adolescent

friendships—which often involve an intimacy and passion that adult friendships lack.

By now, readers have gotten a sense of the poem's structure—or, more accurately, its *lack* of structure. The poem uses frequent [enjambment](#) and long, winding syntax to draw out the tension of the scene. The first 13 lines of the poem are all one sentence, leaving the reader little chance to stop and catch their breath. This dizzying intro evokes the girl's own breathlessness as she clings to the roof. The use of enjambed lines keeps things moving, perhaps reflecting the way that the girl's muscles must stay engaged the entire time she's up there—there's no time for her to stop and relax or second-guess her decision. The momentum created by all this enjambment is also suggestive of the way in which adolescence progresses into adulthood: at breakneck, whirlwind speed.

## LINES 8-13

*keep her mind ...  
... of the house.*

After a brief [caesura](#) (or pause) indicated by a comma, the speaker [repeats](#) the phrase "keep her mind on." This repetition suggests the kind of intense focus that the girl needs to have if she is going to pull off this risky stunt; she must think only of her friend and not the danger of what she's doing.

The speaker then adds that the girl also has to focus on "the open window" that she's trying to reach in order to climb back inside the house. This window's "lever" (or handle) is "flimsy" and "hole-punched," suggesting it might very well fall off when she grabs it!

Yet that's where she must direct "the length of her whole body, leaning in / to the flank of the warm house." The word "flank" refers to the side of a person or animal, and thus subtly [personifies](#) the house as a warm, inviting presence. This makes sense, considering it's a place linked to her parents and childhood. Though sneaking out suggests that the girl is pushing at the boundaries of her independence, at the end of the day she is still not yet a grown-up and wants to return to the enveloping comfort of her family home. In this way, the house becomes [symbolic](#) of the childhood she has yet to leave behind.

Liquid /l/ [consonance](#) throughout these lines ("flimsy, hole-punched, aluminium lever," "length of her whole body, leaning in," etc.) evokes the fluidity the girl needs not only to make it through this dangerous endeavor but also to make it through the transition between childhood and adulthood. Adolescence, the poem implies, is a slippery time in one's life!

## LINES 13-17

*But first she ...  
... on her thighs.*

Before the girl can pass through the window into her house

(and [symbolically](#) return to being a child for a little longer), she "steadies herself, still crouching, the grains of the asphalt / hot beneath her toes and fingertips." The [imagery](#) of her "crouching" is suggestive of the awkward, in-between stage of life she is in; just as crouching is neither standing nor sitting, the girl is neither an adult yet nor still a child. The "hot[ness]" of the "asphalt," meanwhile, evokes the discomfort of being in such a position—one can't stay that way for long!

The speaker then uses a [metaphor](#) to compare the rooftop to "a square of petrified" (or fossilized) "beach." On the one hand, this is simply more evocative imagery (and imagery that relates to the idea that the girl snuck out earlier to go swimming with her friend). Calling the asphalt "petrified," however, also implies that the house is a relic of the past, stuck in time. And, as such, the girl can't stay in it forever.

The speaker then reminds readers of the girl's youth by saying that her "Her tiny breasts / rest lightly on her thighs." She has just begun her adolescence and is neither totally a child nor an adult woman.

### LINES 17-22

*What can she ...  
... of the street,*

The smallness of the girl's body prompts the speaker to pose a [rhetorical question](#):

[...] What can she know  
of the way the world admits us less and less  
the more we grow? [...]

The word "grow" here refers to both literally growing (as in one's body getting bigger) and generally growing up. The older and bigger the girl gets, the speaker implies, the less acceptance she'll find. Basically, the speaker is suggesting that adulthood lacks the freedom and flexibility of youth.

This is also the first time that the speaker has clearly inserted themselves into the poem, and the question implies that the speaker is an adult woman looking back on her own youth with nostalgia (perhaps this girl is a younger version of the speaker, or maybe she is a different girl who simply reminds the speaker of themselves).

But the girl isn't yet grown. And, the speaker says, "For now both girls seem / lit, as if from within." The two young girls seem to glow with some internal light, which [symbolizes](#) all the promise and excitement of their youth. The phrase "for now," however, forebodingly suggests that the girls' luminescence is temporary and will diminish with age.

The speaker goes on to further describe the girls' glow, pointing out their "hair" and "the gold stud / earrings in the first one's ears." These luminous images stand in stark contrast to "the long, grey / eye of the street" that separates them from the

first girl's mother. The [metaphor](#) of the street as "a long, grey / eye" suggests that adulthood is monotonous, colorless, and predictable.

### LINES 23-28

*who does not ...  
... looks up now*

The girl's mother "does not trust her daughter with a key," which suggests that the mother doesn't view her daughter as mature or responsible enough to come and go as she pleases. Yet the speaker also says that the girl and her friend are both "far away" from this mother right now, just as they are "far away" from "the workers about their business in the drab / electroplating factory over the road." This distance isn't just physical, but also [metaphorical](#): the girls have yet to contend with the concerns and drudgery of adult life, be it the mother's caution or the worker's bland routines.

Note the almost frenzied /f/ [alliteration](#) in line 26 as the speaker goes on to say that the girls are:

far too, most far, from the flush-faced secretary

This alliteration adds intensity to the [image](#) of this blushing secretary, who stands in as a kind of foil to the girl on the roof. The speaker is drawing attention to the [juxtaposition](#) between the teenage girls, who are vividly focused on the present, and the wistful daydreaming of the secretary, who is imagining the future, filled with interesting classes and trips, as a means of escape from the drudgery of her current situation.

### LINES 29-33

*from the stirring ...  
... a pale calf,*

The secretary isn't just daydreaming about the future, but also looking at "the stirring omens of the astrology column." The "stirring" here is likely facetious or tongue-in-cheek. That is, the "omens" (signs/predictions) from an astrology column aren't really all that exciting, and they instead point to the secretary's desire to escape from or add more interest and meaning to her humdrum life. One way or another, she is hoping something will *happen* to shake up her routine.

The secretary is then distracted from her daydreams by the sight of "a girl—thirteen if she's a day—standing / in next to nothing in the driveway opposite."

The [alliteration](#) in "next to nothing" draws attention to the girl's innocence: she's unselfconsciously dressed in a bikini. The [imagery](#) of the next line then emphasizes how sunny and bright it is outside. The girl's friend must "shield" her eyes as she looks up at her friend. Remember, too, that earlier the speaker described both girls as seeming "lit, as from within." Their world—the world of youth—is sparkling and intense, a far cry

from the drab office building in which the adult secretary sits.

### LINES 34-38

*a silver anklet ...  
... of the house.*

The poem zooms back in on the teenage girl who is passing back through the window into her house. The speaker describes the scene seemingly from the second girl's perspective, who is standing below and looking up at her friend. As the first girl climbs through the window, the second girl sees "a silver anklet and the five neat *shimmering- / oyster*-painted toenails of an outstretched foot." In other words, the girl's toenails have been deftly painted with the color of an oyster shell and are glimmering in the sunlight.

More specifically, the speaker says that the nail polish "catch[es] the sunlight [...] like the / flash of armaments"—or that is, like the flash of artillery or gunfire. On the one hand, this [simile](#) just speaks to the intensity of youth. To these girls, the world is bright, vivid, and maybe even overwhelming. It's far different from the "grey" street or the "drab" factory across the street. This simile also might suggest that there's something *violent* and dangerous about the intensity of adolescence.

Either way, this "flash" is temporary. For a little longer, the girl remains a child, "dropping gracefully into the shade of the house." Her return to the "shade[d]" interior of the family's house suggests that she is not yet ready to be a fully independent person—she remains dependent on her family.



## SYMBOLS



### THE PASSAGE

The girl's passage from the exterior "porch roof of her family's house" to the interior "shade of the house" [symbolizes](#) her transition from adolescence to adulthood. Just as the girl is trying to get back in through an open window and in danger of falling, so too is she on the edge of adulthood, a scary time in her life when things feel intense and dangerous but also thrilling. The fact that she's "halfway" to the window and "crouching"—a position somewhere between sitting and standing—further reflects the fact that as she's in between being a kid and being an adult.

#### Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "Once she is halfway up there, crouched in her bikini / on the porch roof of her family's house, trembling,"
- **Line 38:** "dropping gracefully into the shade of the house."



### THE HOUSE

The house into which the girl tries to sneak represents the comforting world of her childhood. The girl is starting to test the waters of adulthood, but she hasn't left her childhood behind entirely. She's still positioned "on the porch roof" of the home, which represents her straddling the line between being a kid and being a grown-up. That the house has a "warm flank" against which the girl presses her body suggests that it's a place of familiarity and security. At the same time, the fact that the poem refers to it as "her family's house" rather than simply "her house" suggests that the girl doesn't feel totally free or self-sufficient within its walls. To her, it seems, the world of childhood is safe but also a bit restrictive. And while the girl's toes sparkle in the sunlight, the house is a place of "shade"—suggesting that it shields her from both the harsh light *and* the excitement of the outside world.

#### Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "the porch roof of her family's house"
- **Lines 4-5:** "the narrow windowsill, the sharp / drop of the stairwell"
- **Lines 9-13:** "the open window, / the flimsy, hole-punched, aluminium lever / towards which in a moment she will reach / with the length of her whole body, leaning in / to the warm flank of the house."
- **Lines 14-16:** "the grains of the asphalt / hot beneath her toes and fingertips, / a square of petrified beach."
- **Line 38:** "the shade of the house."



## POETIC DEVICES

### IMAGERY

The poem is driven by its abundant [imagery](#). It wastes no time pulling the reader into its world with its opening lines:

Once she is halfway up there, crouched in her bikini  
on the porch roof of her family's house, trembling

Right away, the reader can clearly picture the scene at hand: a girl in a bikini is balancing on the roof over the porch of a house, hunched over and shaking. This striking image sets a tone of tension and intrigue, pushing the reader onward to find out why she's up there and what will happen to her.

The whole poem is filled with vivid, detailed images like this opening one. In the next lines, such imagery helps to evoke the danger and precariousness of the girl's situation—and, in turn, the excitement of being young. Readers might get a sense of dizziness or vertigo as the speaker describes "the narrow windowsill, the sharp / drop of the stairwell," and "the blond /

gravel somewhere beneath her." They might feel the heat of the roof, evocatively described as a "petrified beach," below the girl's bare feet and hands.

Imagery gives the poem a movie-like quality and turns the reader into a spectator, much like the "flush-faced secretary" who watches the girls from her drab office. There's a sense that readers are glimpsing a brief yet profoundly important moment in time.

Notably, most of the poem's imagery focuses on the girls themselves and thus sets up a sharp [juxtaposition](#) between the thrill of adolescence and the dreariness of adulthood. The girl and her friend seem to glow, their long hair, glittering jewelry, and "shimmering-oyster" nail polish sparkling in the sunlight like "armaments" (weapons) going off. This imagery speaks to the intensity of youth, whereas the stark descriptions of a "long, grey" street and "drab electroplating factory "street" imply that the adult world is dull and boring in comparison.

#### Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-2
- Lines 4-5
- Lines 7-8
- Lines 9-17
- Lines 19-22
- Line 26
- Lines 28-38

## SIMILE

The speaker first uses a [simile](#) when describing how:

[...] both girls seem  
lit, as if from within, their hair and the gold stud  
earrings in the first one's ears; [...]

In other words, to the speaker, the girls have some beautiful, radiant life-force shining out of them, making everything about them seem more intensely illuminated in comparison to the "drab" lives of the workers across the "grey" street. This vivid simile emphasizes just how full of life these young girls are, and it also suggests that the speaker longs for the youth that they possess.

There's another simile towards the poem's end, as the speaker compares the girl's nail polish reflecting sunlight to the "flash"—or firing—of "armaments" (that is, firearms):

[...] the five neat shimmering-  
oyster-painted toenails of an outstretched foot  
which catch the sunlight briefly like the  
flash of armaments [...]

On the one hand, this is simply another piece of vivid imagery.

Just as the girls seem to glow, their nail polish sparkles so brightly in the sunlight that it looks like flashes of gunfire.

And yet, this simile is also strikingly violent. The contrast between the seeming innocence of girlhood and the violence of those flashing "armaments" suggests that the girls are on the edge of danger (an idea also reflected by the fact that the girl is climbing up a roof!).

#### Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Lines 19-20:** "For now both girls seem / lit, as if from within,"
- **Lines 20-21:** " their hair and the gold stud / earrings in the first one's ears;"
- **Lines 34-37:** "the five neat / shimmering- / oyster / -painted toenails of an outstretched foot / which catch the sunlight briefly like the / flash of armaments"

## METAPHOR

The speaker uses a [metaphor](#) in line 16 when comparing the hot asphalt of the porch roof to "a square of petrified beach." In other words, it's as though the roof below her has been fossilized or turned to stone.

On the one hand, this language simply adds to the poem's hint that the girl snuck out to go to the beach with her friend (given that she's also in a bikini). At the same time, the word subtly suggests that the house the girl is returning to is old and rigid—that it restricts her freedom and is at odds with the vibrancy and growth of her blossoming adolescence.

Another metaphor pops up when the speaker describes "the long, grey / eye of the street." By saying that the street is an eye, the poem suggests that the girls are being watched—which in fact they are, by the "flush-faced secretary" (as well as the speaker and reader!).

By describing the eye as "grey" the speaker makes the street seem dull and boring. Not incidentally, roads are often a [symbol](#) of life's journey. Through this metaphor, then, the speaker might be hinting that the metaphorical road of adulthood that awaits the girls is dreary and boring.

#### Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 13-16:** "But first she / steadies herself, still crouching, the grains of the asphalt / hot beneath her toes and fingertips, / a square of petrified beach."
- **Lines 21-22:** "the long, grey / eye of the street"

## JUXTAPOSITION

The poem [juxtaposes](#) the excitement of youth with the monotony of adulthood.

Much of the poem focuses on describing the girl's treacherous journey back into "her family's house" using vivid, precise

**imagery.** The roof is hot, the drop is steep, and the window handle is flimsy. Its asphalt is "petrified," or fossilized—a **metaphor** that suggests the world it represents a relic of the girl's past.

The description of the girl, meanwhile, emphasizes her youth and fragility, which stand out all the more strongly against the background of this dangerous climb: her is body exposed (she's "in next to nothing" in her bikini) and her feet are bare against the hot "asphalt" of the roof. Her chest is "tiny," underscoring the fact that she's barely a teenager. The contrast between the girl and this hot, "petrified" roof underscores the excitement, challenges, and dangers of growing up. The girl is only just starting to become more independent and self-aware, and this "passage," such juxtaposition implies, is a treacherous one.

The poem also juxtaposes the energy and excitement of early adolescence with the dreariness of adulthood. Where the street is colorless and lacking in excitement, the girls "seem / lit, as if from within." Their glistening hair and their "gold stud / earrings" are in sharp contrast to the "drab / electroplating factory" where the adults work.

Lines 26-38 continue this juxtaposition, this time contrasting "the flush-faced secretary / [...] with her head full of the evening class / she plans to take" with the teenage girl and her "silver anklet and the five neat *shimmering-* / *oyster-painted* toenails of an outstretched foot." While the secretary is only able to dream about excitement, be it "the trip of a lifetime" or "the stirring omens of the astrology column," the girls are fully immersed in their adventurous reality, too present in their own lives to stare wistfully out of windows at someone else's.

#### Where Juxtaposition appears in the poem:

- Lines 16-19
- Lines 19-22
- Lines 24-26
- Lines 26-38

## RHETORICAL QUESTION

The speaker poses a  **rhetorical question**  in lines 17-19:

[...] What can she know  
of the way the world admits us less and less  
the more we grow? [...]

This question is spurred by the speaker's observation in the previous line that the girl's "tiny breasts / rest lightly on her thighs." This bit of **imagery** emphasizes the girl's youth and fragility; she might be testing boundaries, but she's still a kid—and, this rhetorical question implies, she's thus not yet aware of the way the world works.

The girl's size represents her innocence and ignorance of the adult world, which becomes less friendly to and accepting of

people "the more [they] grow"—that is, the bigger and older they get. The girl's ignorance, this question implies, is part of what makes her seem to glow. She's filled with hope and excitement because she's gaining more independence and freedom but doesn't yet know what adulthood is really like.

#### Where Rhetorical Question appears in the poem:

- **Lines 17-19:** "What can she know / of the way the world admits us less and less / the more we grow?"

## ALLITERATION

The poem doesn't use much **alliteration**, focusing instead on vivid **imagery** to draw the reader in. There are a few subtle moments of the device in the poem, however, which add moments of emphasis and music to the language.

These include the alliteration (and assonance) of "thing" and "think" in line 3 and the breathy /h/ sounds of lines 6-7 ("whom," "half," "who").

The clearest moment of alliteration comes in line 26, with the insistent repetition of the /f/ sound:

far too, most far, from the flush-faced secretary

Apart from simply adding some interesting sound to the poem, this moment signals that the secretary is an important character. Indeed, she acts as a foil or counterpart to the younger girls. Her fantasizing about classes and "trips" she plans to "take" later contrast with the girls' active, immediate adventure. Using alliteration makes the secretary's daydreaming seem more lyrical and lovely—which is ironic, given that it actually pales in comparison to the actual adventure that the girls are having.

#### Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "thing," "think"
- **Line 6:** "whom," "half"
- **Line 7:** "who"
- **Line 17:** "What"
- **Line 18:** "way," "world"
- **Line 22:** "far," "from"
- **Line 26:** "far," "far," "from," "flush," "faced"
- **Line 27:** "full"
- **Line 28:** "to take," "trip"
- **Line 31:** "next," "nothing"

## CONSONANCE

While the poem doesn't use much **alliteration**, there is a fair amount of broader **consonance**. These repeated sounds lend the poem musicality and emphasis, and they can also help bring the poem's **imagery** to life.

Consider, for example, the harsh, staccato /p/ sounds in "sharp / drop" across lines 4 and 5, which evoke the potential pain of a fall from the roof.

Later, a flurry of consonance adds momentum to the passage describing the girl's impending reach toward the window. Like the crescendo of a song in a movie, this accumulation of sound make the moment feel all the more intense:

the flimsy, hole-punched, aluminium lever  
towards **which** in a moment she **will** reach  
with the length of her whole body, leaning in  
to the **warm** flank of the house. [...]

Though the poem doesn't have a set [meter](#) or [rhyme scheme](#), moments like this keep it sounding interesting and exciting.

#### Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "crouched," "bikini"
- **Line 2:** "porch roof," "family's"
- **Line 3:** "thing," "think"
- **Line 4:** "narrow windowsill"
- **Lines 4-5:** "sharp / drop"
- **Line 5:** "stairwell"
- **Line 6:** "whom," "half"
- **Line 7:** "who"
- **Lines 7-8:** "blond / gravel"
- **Line 8:** "beneath"
- **Line 10:** "flimsy, hole-punched, aluminium lever"
- **Line 11:** "towards which"
- **Lines 11-12:** "will reach / with"
- **Line 12:** "length," "whole," "leaning in"
- **Line 13:** "warm flank"
- **Line 15:** "toes," "fingertips"
- **Line 16:** "petrified beach"
- **Lines 16-17:** "tiny breasts / rest lightly"
- **Line 18:** "way," "world," "admits us less," "less"
- **Line 21:** "earrings," "ears"
- **Line 26:** "far," "far," "from," "flush-faced secretary"
- **Line 27:** "full"
- **Line 28:** "to take," "trip"
- **Line 29:** "stirring," "astrology"
- **Line 30:** "standing"
- **Line 31:** "next," "nothing"
- **Line 34:** "silver anklet"
- **Lines 35-35:** "oyster / -painted toenails"
- **Line 35:** "outstretched foot"
- **Line 36:** "catch"
- **Line 37:** "flash"

#### ASSONANCE

Like [alliteration](#) and [consonance](#), [assonance](#) adds to the poem's musicality and [imagery](#). Take the evocative round /oh/ sounds

of "open window," which seem to bring this image to life through sound, or the light /eh/ sounds in "breasts / rest," which lend a gentle cadence to this description of the girl's young body. Similarly, the short /ih/ sounds of "lit, as if from within" emphasize the importance of this moment in which the girls appear luminous to the speaker. The long /ay/ sounds in the poem's final line, meanwhile, are themselves slow and "graceful," echoing the way the girl "gracefully" enters the "shade of the house."

#### Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 9:** "open," "window"
- **Line 11:** "which in," "will," "reach"
- **Line 12:** "with"
- **Line 16:** "breasts"
- **Line 17:** "rest," "lightly," "thighs," "know"
- **Line 19:** "grow"
- **Line 20:** "lit," "if," "within"
- **Line 23:** "does," "trust"
- **Line 25:** "over," "road"
- **Line 29:** "astrology," "column"
- **Line 38:** "gracefully," "shade"

#### ENJAMBMENT

Almost all of the poem's lines are [enjambéd](#) (in fact, depending on how strictly one defines the term, it's arguable that they are all enjambéd apart from the last!). As a result, the poem flows down the page quickly and smoothly.

This heavy enjambment, along with the lack of stanza breaks or other white space, echoes the girl's rather acrobatic endeavor as she tries to get back into her house. Just as she only gets a couple of chances to stop and "stead[y] herself" before climbing into the window, the poem only gives the reader a few chances to stop and catch their breath before being pulled along to the next line.

Similarly, enjambment in lines 3-9 draws attention to the girl's racing thoughts:

she knows that the one thing she must not do is to  
**think**  
of the narrow windowsill, the **sharp**  
**drop** of the stairwell; she must keep her **mind**  
on the friend with whom she is half in **love**  
and who is waiting for her on the **blond**  
**gravel** somewhere beneath her, keep her **mind**  
on her and on the fact of the open window,

Lines run from one to the next without a pause or imposition, which, in a way, might evoke the "ease" of the "passage" mentioned in the title. At the same time, the sense of unstoppable momentum that enjambment creates reflects the

relentless passage of time; the reader gets pulled down the page just as the girl is pulled towards adulthood.

#### Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "bikini / on"
- **Lines 3-4:** "think / of"
- **Lines 4-5:** "sharp / drop"
- **Lines 5-6:** "mind / on"
- **Lines 6-7:** "love / and"
- **Lines 7-8:** "blond / gravel"
- **Lines 8-9:** "mind / on"
- **Lines 10-11:** "lever / towards"
- **Lines 11-12:** "reach / with"
- **Lines 12-13:** "in / to"
- **Lines 13-14:** "she / steadies"
- **Lines 14-15:** "asphalt / hot"
- **Lines 16-17:** "breasts / rest"
- **Lines 17-18:** "know / of"
- **Lines 18-19:** "less / the"
- **Lines 19-20:** "seem / lit"
- **Lines 20-21:** "stud / earrings"
- **Lines 21-22:** "grey / eye"
- **Lines 22-23:** "mother / who"
- **Lines 24-25:** "drab / electroplating"
- **Lines 26-27:** "secretary / who"
- **Lines 27-28:** "class / she"
- **Lines 28-29:** "now / from"
- **Lines 29-30:** "column / at"
- **Lines 30-31:** "standing / in"
- **Lines 32-33:** "one / shielding"
- **Lines 34-35:** "shimmering- / oyster / -painted"
- **Lines 35-36:** "foot / which"
- **Lines 36-37:** "the / flash"
- **Lines 37-38:** "before / dropping"

distance between the lives of these teenage girls and the lives of working adults. It's not that the workers are so very *physically* "far" from these girls—in fact, they're right across the street! It's that the colorful and uncertain intensity of the girls couldn't be farther from the tedious routine of the workers.

#### Where Diacope appears in the poem:

- **Line 18:** "less and less"
- **Line 26:** "far," "far"



## VOCABULARY

**Flimsy** (Line 10) - Light and insubstantial; fragile.

**Aluminium** (Line 10) - A light, silvery-grey metal (also known as "aluminum").

**Flank** (Lines 12-13) - Side.

**Petrified** (Lines 14-16) - *Petrified* has two different meanings that are applicable here, depending on whether one interprets the word as describing the girl or the asphalt. The first is terrified, or frightened to the point of not being able to move. The second is when organic material is fossilized or changed into a stony substance.

**Electroplating** (Lines 24-25) - A process in which metal is coated with a thin layer of another metal to improve the metal's corrosion resistance.

**Flush-faced** (Line 26) - Blushing; face colored by emotion.

**Omens** (Line 29) - Portents; signs of something to come.

**Shimmering-oyster-painted** (Lines 34-35) - The speaker is describing the color of nail polish that the girl is wearing on her toes.

**Armaments** (Line 37) - Weapons or firearms.



## FORM, METER, & RHYME

### FORM

The poem is made up of 38 lines that form one long stanza. Sentences are [enjambéd](#) across multiple lines; in fact, the entire second half of the poem (lines 19 through 38) is a single sentence with twisting, sinuous syntax.

This echoes the girl's precarious climb as she navigates getting back into the house through an open window, and draws out the tension of the dangerous situation she's in. It also highlights the [metaphorical](#) journey the girl is on from adolescence to adulthood. This journey isn't made up of discrete chapters but is rather a stretch of time in which the girl goes from being on the outside of adulthood (just as she is on the outside of the house) to "gracefully" becoming an adult.

### DIACOPE

The poem uses [diacope](#) in line 18:

[...] What can she know  
of the way the world admits us less and less  
the more we grow? [...]

Diacope draws attention to the incremental nature of growing up and losing access to certain aspects of the world. With every inch a person "grow[s]," it seems, they are that much "less" free in the world.

The speaker uses diacope again in line 26 to build a sense of tension and momentum:

far too, most far, from the flush-faced secretary

The [repetition](#) of the word "far" stresses the [metaphorical](#)



The single stanza also emphasizes the way the girl is utterly absorbed in the task at hand; she can't afford to look away or consider the consequences if she were to fall from her perch. In this way, the poem suggests that part of the intensity of adolescence is that its intrinsic difficulties force one to be completely present for it—unlike the humdrum responsibilities of adulthood.

## METER

The poem is written in [free verse](#), meaning it doesn't follow any set [meter](#). It unfolds casually and conversationally, and it uses a combination of other devices (such as [enjambment](#)) to achieve its subtle rhythms and momentum.

## RHYME SCHEME

As a [free verse](#) poem, "An Easy Passage" doesn't have a steady [rhyme scheme](#). As with its lack of [meter](#), this keeps things feeling casual and conversational. It's also a bit unpredictable; readers are unsure of what sound will come next, perhaps evoking the confusing and exhilarating feeling of being young.

That said, there are a few subtle [rhymes](#) in the poem. Take lines 16-19:

a square of petrified beach. Her tiny **breasts**  
rest lightly on her thighs. — What can she **know**  
of the way the world admits us less and **less**  
the more we **grow**? For now both girls seem

This little cluster of rhymes, however subtle, is notable in a poem that by and large avoids rhyme. Not coincidentally, this is also the only place in the poem where the speaker actually inserts themselves into the narrative, using the pronoun "us." The use of rhyme here makes this moment stand out all the more clearly to the reader's ear and thus makes its message all the more memorable.



## SPEAKER

The speaker of "An Easy Passage" acts as an anonymous, omniscient narrator. The speaker knows what's going on in the girl's head and is also aware of things that the girl *isn't* aware of—such as the "flush-faced secretary" across the street who looks up from "the stirring omens of the astrology column" to see the girl's foot disappearing into the house.

The speaker never refers to themselves directly, however. The closest they get to revealing anything about themselves is when they ask:

[...] What can [the girl] know  
of the way the world admits us less and less  
the more we grow?" [...]

This [rhetorical question](#) implies that the speaker is an adult, but it still isn't clear where they are in relation to the events of the poem.

It's possible that the speaker is an older version of the girl, looking back on her own adolescence. Or the speaker might just be observing the scene, much like the secretary, and imagining the girl's thoughts and the secretary's "plans." Regardless of who the speaker is, it's clear that the speaker feels nostalgic about being young and, perhaps, rather disappointed with adulthood.

Indeed, while the "flush-faced secretary" might look out and see the teenage girl's struggle to get back into the house unseen as exciting and representative of a lost girlhood, one might also argue that both the secretary and the teenage girls are driven by deep-seated boredom. Perhaps the girls don't view their lives as any more exciting than the secretary does hers, and ultimately it is the speaker's longing for a world that "admits" adults that infuses the girls' endeavor with significance.



## SETTING

The poem starts on the "porch roof" of a house, where a teenage girl has climbed in an attempt to get back into her house through an "open window." It's not exactly a safe spot: the speaker mentions the "narrow windowsill" where the girl could easily lose her footing, the "sharp drop" of the stairs where she might hurt herself if she falls, and the "flimsy, hole-punched aluminium lever" (i.e., the fragile metal handle) of the window she's trying to pass through.

Zooming out a bit, there's the "blond" (or light-colored) "gravel" (small rocks or pebbles) below the house, where the girl's friend is standing and keeping an eye out for her. It seems from the "bikini" that the girl is wearing and the mention of hot asphalt that it's summer—a season often linked with youth—and the girls have snuck out to go swimming.

The girl's house represents the comforts and familiarity of childhood. The fact that she's crouched "halfway" up the porch, in turn, [symbolizes](#) her being halfway between childhood and adulthood. The thrilling dangers of her climb speak to the excitement of adolescence.

Zooming out even further, the poem's setting also includes the "long, grey / eye of the street" the house is on. On the other side of the street is a "drab / electroplating factory" as well as a "flush-faced secretary" who is watching the girls. There's a clear separation between this dreary office and the house, which represents the separation between adolescence and adulthood.



## CONTEXT

## LITERARY CONTEXT

"An Easy Passage" won the 2010 Forward Prize for best single poem and was later published in Julia Copus's 2012 collection *The World's Two Smallest Humans*. The collection as a whole has been noted for its intimacy and grace as it tackles themes related to childhood and the boredom of growing up in the suburbs, adultery and its aftermath, and the struggles and joys of in vitro fertilization

In addition to being a poet, Copus is also a memoirist, biographer, and children's book writer, and she takes inspiration from a variety of genres. She [cites](#) poets as disparate as Anne Carson and Billy Collins as being important to her development, along with renowned Canadian short story writer Alice Munro and British dramatist and screenwriter David Eldridge.

Coming of age, the loss of innocence and the contrast between youth and adulthood are, of course, common themes in contemporary poetry. For comparable poems, readers might look to Helen Dunmore's "[To My Nine-Year-Old Self](#)," Gwen Harwood's "[Barn Owl](#)," Carol Ann Duffy's "[In Mrs Tilscher's Class](#)," and Billy Collins's "[On Turning Ten](#)."

## HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Copus was born in London, England, in 1969, and "An Easy Passage" may draw from her own experiences coming of age in the '80s: the "bikini" the teenage girl is wearing, the "gold stud / earrings," the "electroplating factory," the "astrology column," the "silver anklet," and the "*shimmering-oyster-painted toenails*" all point to a recognizably modern world.

The speaker's nostalgia for the vibrance and freedom of adolescence is also markedly modern, as is the depiction of adulthood as "drab" and "grey." One might even view the poem as implicitly critical of a capitalist consumer society, as the [juxtaposition](#) between the glowing teenage girls and the dull lives of adults working in factories and offices seems to imply

that these factories and offices somehow diminish people and rob them of an essential sense of excitement for life.

At the same time, the poem may be read as a more personal and even autobiographical account of growing up in the modern suburbs.



## MORE RESOURCES

## EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- [Copus on Writing](#) – Listen to Copus talk about what brought her to writing. (<https://www.rlf.org.uk/showcase/julia-copus-wiw/>)
- [More About the Poet](#) – An introduction to Copus's life and work from the Poetry Archive. (<https://poetryarchive.org/poet/julia-copus/>)
- [The World's Two Smallest Humans](#) – Read a review of the collection in which "An Easy Passage" was published. (<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2012/aug/12/julia-copus-smallest-humans-review>)
- [An Interview with Copus](#) – Watch clips from a 2014 interview with the poet for The Bloodaxe Archive Project. (<https://vimeo.com/88738154>)



## HOW TO CITE

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