The Lost Woman

SUMMARY

The speaker's mother died quite suddenly, her voice clear though her body was in intense pain. One morning in June the speaker came home from school and was shocked to see, next to the little creek that flows beneath the narrow road, the back of a bright white ambulance driving away from the gate to their house.

Her mother didn't come back and the speaker didn't get to see her buried, so she romanticized their relationship in her mind. Her mother, once clingy like vines of ivy, became a tree that's always just out of reach, like a rainbow that keeps hopping further away down the road each time the speaker tries to get closer. Now the speaker is the one who's reaching out to hold on to her mother.

As the years passed, the speaker created a different life for her mother. In her fantasies, her mother wasn't stuck in a boring marriage. She managed a military snack bar during multiple wars. Smart and articulate in a town filled with unoriginal ideas, she finally found someone who could keep up with her while attending an extracurricular class at a summer program.

Heroes and poets always have their own lost woman, a ghostly presence that fills the home, someone they can pay and long for. This woman never changes or grows; she's a dead body that those heroes and poets never actually know.

This lost woman is usually harmless. She doesn't make it a point to pace around in the middle of the night. She emerges only in the soft light of early evening, along with the rabbits. The heroes and poets are filled with self-loathing because of the way they lost her, but her territory is boring and she doesn't scold them.

The speaker's lost woman, on the other hand, is always snapping at her from a distance, saying, "You didn't really love me. Maybe I gave up too much for you. I taught you how to go further in life than I could, and you sure did. Darling, *you're* the ghost whose voice echoes in the darkness; *I'm* not the one who's lost."

THEMES

GRIEF, LOSS, AND MEMORY

"The Lost Woman" explores grief's power to warp memory. The speaker reveals the lasting impact of losing her mother at a young age, comparing her subsequent grief to a kind of "romance." (Beer's own mother died of cancer when the poet was only 14, and the poem reflects her personal experience.) The speaker admits that for many years she clung to an image of her mother that didn't necessarily reflect who she really was. This romanticization of her mother in death, the poem suggests, is one way that the speaker copes with her loss—and with the guilt she feels for not having had a better relationship with her mother while she was still alive. All in all, the poem suggests that grief is powerful and slippery, reshaping and sometimes distorting the way we remember those we have lost.

The speaker loses her mother suddenly: she died without "warning," and the speaker came home from school one day to see the "shocking white" of an ambulance bearing her mother away. She never saw her mother again, not even for burial, and as such never got closure.

The speaker began to develop a romanticized version of her mother in her grief, perhaps as a way of grappling with her great loss. Gone was the "ivy-mother," clingy and smothering as a climbing vine. Instead, the speaker "turned" her mother into a "tree" that "hops away like a rainbow" whenever she tries to "approach" it. Her imagined mother, in other words, becomes a sheltering presence in death, yet also one whom the speaker can never quite catch up to, leaving the speaker to "clutch" at a dream. Death creates a role reversal: now it's the speaker who longs to cling to her mother, to stop her from being truly "lost."

She also replaces her real mother with one who wasn't "Frustrated [...] by a dull marriage," and who was the sparkling "wit of a cliché-ridden village." In other words, she makes up a fictional version of her mother to chase after—a version who had a happier, freer, more exciting life. It's unclear if this is an *entirely* fictional version of her mother or if the speaker is simply choosing to focus her memories on very select parts of her mother's life. It's also possible that the speaker, standing in for Beer, is describing her *own* life here, which she lived in a way "for," as in on behalf of, her mother. In any case, the poem implies that creating this fantasy version of her mother is how the speaker makes amends and softens the pain of her loss.

In reality, the speaker did not have a great relationship with her unhappy mother. When the speaker isn't romanticizing her mother's memory, another imagined version of the dead woman "evermore snaps" at her to insist that the speaker "did not love [her]." The speaker can hear her mother say, "I sacrificed too much perhaps," suggesting that she put her own happiness on hold for her daughter's. She taught the speaker "to rise above [her]"—and the speaker did exactly that. The speaker's grief is complicated, the poem implies, by her guilt about living a life that her mother could not. In this way, the poem illustrates how grief can warp memory, as people tell themselves stories that are more comforting but less true.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-18
- Lines 31-36

MOTHERS AND DAUGHTERS

In "The Lost Woman," the speaker's relationship with her now-deceased mother is marked by a complicated mixture of love, envy, and resentment. The poem implies that the speaker's mother was overbearing but that she also laid the groundwork for the speaker to "r[i]se above her"—that is, she gave her daughter what she needed to succeed. At the same time, the poem hints that the speaker feels guilty about leaving her mother behind in the process. Even in death, their relationship is far from simple. Both mother and daughter seem to long for and rebel against their connection, each at once a supportive *and* limiting presence in the other's life.

The speaker implies that her mother was (and still is) a suffocating, critical presence—an "ivy-mother" who clung to the speaker in life and in death "snaps" that the speaker doesn't love her enough. This might imply that the speaker struggled to feel close to her mother while she was alive. If her mother was so controlling, the speaker may have spent all her time trying to break free—only for her mother to break free from *her* by dying.

The speaker also imagines her mother saying that she "sacrificed too much" for her daughter and resents that her daughter rose "above her." This implies that the mother provided for her daughter and wanted her to succeed, but that she also begrudges being left behind completely. Perhaps the speaker feels guilty for the life she's gone on to have without her mother, knowing what her mother gave up for her.

Yet the speaker resents her mother, too. She says her mother "went" rather than died, hinting that the speaker feels like her mother actively left *her* behind. She clearly remains shaken by her mother's abrupt, "shocking" departure, which left the speaker feeling unmoored—"the ghost / With the bat-voice." By this, the poem might mean that the speaker's voice now echoes out in the night, blindly searching for what she's lost. Now, the speaker "clutches" after her mother, who, in death, is always just out of reach, unable or unwilling to provide the comfort the speaker craves.

The speaker seems to want to have a more straightforward, loving relationship with her mother's memory, but remembered pain keeps getting in the way. Loss can't untangle the mess of difficult feelings connecting mother and daughter; their relationship remains complicated even in death.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-18
- Lines 31-36

LOSS, INSPIRATION, AND THE FEMALE MUSE

In "The Lost Woman," the speaker argues that "every poet" and "hero" has a "lost woman": some missing feminine figure who inspires their art or quests. This suggests that, as difficult as it is to come to terms with loss, grief can also be a driving, creative force. (Indeed, it's what drove Beer to write this poem.) At the same time, the poem hints that this tendency to idealize "lost women" flattens their humanity.

Some time after losing her mother, the speaker comes to realize that many famous figures were driven by a loss like her own: "lost women" are classic muses for "hero[es]" and "poet[s]," from Orpheus to Dante to Wordsworth. These muses do not "alter" or "grow" like real people; they "haunt the home[s]" of the people who lost them, but they're "nearly always benign." The heroes and poets may "hate / Themselves for losing" these women, but in the end, these ghostly ladies are harmless and meek. If anything, they serve as motivation, inspiring people (and notable *men* in particular) to do heroic things and write beautiful poems in their memory.

At the same time, the speaker suggests that these "lost women" tend to end up being represented as gentle, "bland" muses whom the artists/heroes "need never get to know." This reflects how the romanticization of these figures erases their complex personhood; their actual *identities* get lost in their role as *muses*. There's thus some irony here: treating lost women as idealized, inspiring figures denies some of the reality of who they were in life. It's worth noting that the poem is specific about gender here, too, perhaps implying that society is a little too quick to turn *women* into ideas.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 19-36

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-6

My mother went ...
... from the gate.

"The Lost Woman" drops the reader right into the traumatic event that inspired Beer to write the poem: the sudden loss of her mother at a young age. (Beer's own mother died of cancer when the poet was 14.)

The speaker begins by saying her mother "went with no more warning." The word "went" is deliberately vague; the poem

doesn't immediately reveal the mother's fate, creating suspense that mirrors the speaker's own shock upon coming home to find her mother gone. The enjambment of line 1 creates yet more anticipation: where, exactly, did the mother go without warning? Readers have to jump to the next line to find the answer to this question.

What's more, "went" implies that the mother had some agency here—that she *chose* to leave her daughter behind. This isn't the case, readers will learn in the next line, but already the poem hints at some of the bubbling resentment and discomfort lingering beneath the surface of this mother-daughter relationship.

In line 2, the speaker clarifies the situation—somewhat: the only "warning" her mother gave about her imminent departure was "a bright voice and a bad pain." By "bright voice," the speaker might mean that her mother remained cheerful or level-headed to the end. (That "bright voice" might also evoke a sharp, sudden gasp of surprise.) A "bad pain," meanwhile, hints at the mother's illness.

The speaker was "Home from school" (either coming home after class or out for summer break) when she saw the "back of a shocking white / Ambulance" driving away from the gate to her home. That "shocking white" color reflects the speaker's own "shock" at the situation. She did not expect to come home to find her mother being carted away in an ambulance.

This stanza establishes the poem's form: the poem is written in sestets (six-line stanzas) with an ABABCC rhyme scheme. This pattern can be hard to hear at times, however, because many of the poem's rhymes are very subtly slant rhymes ("white" and "gate," "began" and "down," etc.). Its music is quite subtle.

LINES 7-12

She never returned ...
... ones that clutch.

The speaker never saw her mother again, not even for a funeral. (Beer's mother died of cancer, and Beer wasn't allowed to see her at the end of her life or witness her burial.) The diacope of "never" emphasizes the fact that the speaker's mother is gone for good:

> She **never** returned and I **never** saw

Again, the speaker's language ascribes some *agency* to her mother: she says "She never **returned**," as though she had a choice about whether to come back or not. Once more, this hints at the speaker's underlying *resentment* of her mother for leaving her and her longing to be reunited.

Building on this longing, the speaker says that she started "a romance" in her mind. That is, she *romanticized* her mother in memory: she began to idealize her in hindsight. Gone was the overbearing "ivy-mother." Ivy is a vine that often chokes out other plants as it climbs up them, so this metaphor implies that the speaker's mother was a clingy, suffocating presence in her life. In her grief-stricken memory, the speaker instead sees her mother as a "tree": something more solid, able to provide shelter and protection without smothering the speaker.

The speaker longs to be comforted by her mother, this metaphor suggests, yet this tree-mother remains always just out of reach: she "hops away like a rainbow down / The avenue" as the speaker attempts to get closer to her. In other words, this vision of her mother keeps eluding the speaker's grasp, moving further away with each step the speaker takes. Rainbows are impossible to catch; they can be seen from far away but dissolve up close. This simile thus suggests that the speaker's idealized tree-mother isn't *real*. Her mother *wasn't* a firm, sheltering tree in real life, and the speaker can never actually reach her.

Now that her mother is dead, the speaker is the one with "tendrils" that "clutch," reaching out like that aforementioned clinging ivy. In death, their relationship has basically flipped upside down; the speaker may have tried to break free from her mother's clingy grasp in life, but she is trying desperately to cling to her mother's memory now that she has died.

LINES 13-18

I made a ...
... OU summer school.

As the years wore on, the speaker says, she "made a life for" her mother. This might mean:

- The speaker imagined a *fantasy* life for her mother that was more appealing than the one she *actually* led. In trying to cope with her grief, the speaker decided to remember her mother not as she was, but as she might have been in another life.
- Alternatively, the speaker means that she lived her *own* life on *behalf* of her mother, taking advantage of opportunities that her mother never had or doing what her mother had pushed her to do while still alive.

In either case, this "life" was one in which the speaker's mother was no longer trapped in "a dull marriage." She "ran a canteen" (or military bar) "through several wars." This version of her mother was also the "wit of a cliché-ridden village": someone sharper and cleverer than those around her. This idealized version of the speaker's mother "met her match at an extra-mural" (or extra-curricular) "Class and the OU summer school." ("OU" refers to the Open University, a public research university in the UK). In short, this woman lived life fully, pursuing excitement and education.

Again, the implication is that the speaker's real-life mother did none of these things. Perhaps the speaker feels guilty that her

mother never got to lead the life she wanted, and so the speaker fantasizes about such a life for her mother in her own mind.

LINES 19-24

Many a hero ...
... get to know.

In the fourth stanza, the speaker turns away from her own experience to make a broader observation about grief. "Many a hero" and "every poet," the speaker says, has had a "lost woman" of their own: a woman they loved and whose presence in their lives persists even after her death.

The poem, here, gestures towards the fact that "lost women" are classic muses in history and myth. Note how the speaker says "hero in his time" and "has acquired / A lost woman." In many a legend or poetic sequence, *male* figures are driven by the loss of *female* figures, whose memories these men take hold of for their own purposes; "acquired" suggests that these lost women are taken against their will or collected like objects.

These women must be "compensated," the speaker continues: paid or honored, perhaps for the sacrifice of themselves in service of the hero and poet's inspiration. They must be "desired," missed and longed for. The implication is that heroes' deeds and poets' art is repayment to these ghosts who "haunt the home."

These lost women are also stuck in time, never changing or growing. They're static objects of desire and inspiration, muses to be used by the living, who "need never get to know" them. By this, the speaker might be saying that they already know these women well and thus don't have to try to learn more about them in death. Perhaps the speaker envies those who have a simpler relationship with their ghosts.

More likely, the speaker might be making a more biting comment on the way that turning women into ghostly muses obscures who they were in life. The poets and heroes don't have to bother getting to know who these women really were; they just need to treat them as a source of unchanging unwavering inspiration for their own art and deeds. they don't get too emotionally attached to these muses.

Note the use of anaphora in line 23:

> Who will not alter, who will not grow,

This repetition emphasizes just how static these figures are. In a way, romanticizing the dead makes them a little less *human*.

LINES 25-30

She is nearly ...
... does not chide.

The "She" here refers to the more general "lost woman" mentioned in the previous stanza rather than to the speaker's mother. These ghostly lost women are "nearly always benign," or harmless. They don't walk around in the middle of the night like some kind of sinister ghoul in a horror story. Instead, they are "Soft and crepuscular"; they only come out in the twilight hours, in "rabbit-light."

On one level, this term refers to the fact that these hours are also when rabbits are most active. Symbolically, this term implies that these women are gentle and non-threatening. The smooth sibilance here ("stride," "Soft and crepuscular") conveys the timidity of these ghosts.

The speaker then says that the heroes and poets "hate / Themselves for losing her as they did," a phrase that places the blame for this loss squarely on those heroes/poets themselves. (By contrast, recall how the speaker earlier implied that her mother had a role in her own "loss": she said that her mother "went" and "never returned," bestowing her mother with agency and, in turn, *blame*. Again, readers might get the hint that the speaker feels some resentment, however illogical, toward her mother for leaving her as she did.)

The lost women of heroes and poets occupy a "bland" (or dull and monotonous) "country." This suggests they aren't vivid, terrible ghosts but faint, soft-spoken ones. They do not "chide" (or criticize) the living. It sounds like the heroes/poets don't really have to *deal* with these ghosts at all, at least not on a deep level; these lost women don't reprimand the living. This is not the case with the speaker's own lost woman, as readers will learn in the final stanza.

LINES 31-36

But my lost ...
... am not lost."

In the final stanza, the speaker juxtaposes other people's docile "lost women" with her own mother, whose voice "evermore snaps" accusations at her. While those other lost women do not "chide," the speaker's mother is a constant, nagging presence in the speaker's mind. She is not from the "bland" country mentioned in the previous stanza; instead, "From somewhere else," she laments sacrificing "too much" on behalf of her daughter, whom the poem implies she resents for moving past her in life.

The speaker's "lost woman" is rather bitter and biting, reminding the speaker of all the ways she has failed to be a grateful, loving daughter. The sibilance of these lines ("lost," "snaps," "somewhere else," "sacrificed") makes the mother's voice sound menacing, like the hiss of a snake.

The speaker might be recalling things her mother *really* said to her in life. More likely, though, is that she's imagining what her mother would say to her if she could see her now. This voice, then, is really a manifestation of the speaker's guilt and regret. These bitter accusations plague the speaker, the poem suggests, because on some level that's exactly what she

believes: that she didn't love her mother enough and that she wasn't grateful enough for the sacrifices her mother made on her behalf. The speaker's mother gave up some of her own dreams so that her daughter could have a better life, it seems, and the speaker took the opportunities she was given. Now, the speaker imagines that her domineering mother would bitterly resent her for "rising above" her—for going further in life than she could. The speaker longs to be close to her mother, but the truth is that, even in death, their relationship remains marred by envy, insecurity, and resentment.

The anaphora in lines 33-34 draws attention to the mother's presence:

> I sacrificed too much perhaps,
> I showed you the way to rise above me

These "I" statements drown out the speaker's own voice; indeed, her mother gets the last word in the poem, which ends with a twist: the speaker's mother declares that the *speaker* is really "the ghost / With the bat-voice." The mother isn't "lost" at all; the speaker is the one who's clamoring around in the dark, a shadow of herself and "lost" without her mother there to guide her.

The bat metaphor suggests that the speaker is flying blind, moving through life without a sense of direction. Bats use echolocation to navigate, so the metaphor might also refer to the way that the speaker's voice "evermore" echoes throughout her head as a bat's echoes through the night. (Again, though the speaker says that her mother is the one talking, this voice is really a manifestation of the speaker's guilt and regret. She's talking to herself.) The speaker is the one grasping around in the dark, desperately trying to hold onto her mother's memory and find a path forward without her.

POETIC DEVICES

METAPHOR

The poem contains a few vivid metaphors that help to illustrate the speaker's relationship to her mother's memory.

The speaker's mother died suddenly, and the speaker didn't get to witness her burial. As such, the speaker says, "a romance began." Lacking the closure of goodbye or burial, the speaker's relationship with her mother was left unsettled. Describing her obsession with her mother's memory as a romance reflects the speaker's intense desire to be reunited with her mother.

The speaker also coped with her loss by *romanticizing* her mother in her memory—she viewed her through rose-colored glasses. Using another metaphor, she says that the "ivy-mother turned into a tree." Ivy is a vine that clings to other plants, often smothering them. This metaphor suggests that in real life, the speaker's mother was a domineering, suffocating presence—someone the speaker perhaps longed to get away from. But after she died, the speaker's grief warped her memory of her mother, changing her into a tree: something sturdy and solid, that provides shelter. The tree metaphor suggests that the speaker wants to remember her as being more nurturing than she actually was.

But this version of her mother remains always out of reach. The speaker chases after her, but she is like a "rainbow," impossible to catch. Thus, the speaker becomes the one with "tendrils [...] that clutch."While in life her mother was clingy and overbearing, in death it is the speaker who clings to her memory of her mother.

In the last stanza, the speaker imagines her mother's voice saying to her:

> [...] You are the ghost
> With the bat-voice my dear. [...]

This metaphor implies that the speaker has become a shadow of herself. Her mother's death has had a profound and lasting impact on her life, to the point that she's the one who is really "lost." Like a bat, she is blindly trying to find in her mother's absence. Note, too, that bats navigate using echolocation; as such, the metaphorical phrase "ghost with the bat-voice" hints at the way that the speaker is calling out in the dark to her mother, her voice is constantly echoing about in her mind.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 8-9:** "So a romance began. / The ivy-mother turned into a tree"
- **Line 12:** "My tendrils are the ones that clutch."
- **Lines 27-28:** "Soft and crepuscular in rabbit- / Light she comes out."
- **Line 30:** "Her country is bland"
- **Lines 35-36:** "You are the ghost / With the bat-voice, my dear."

SIMILE

There is a simile folded into the metaphor in lines 9-11:

> The ivy-mother turned into a tree
> That still hops away like a rainbow down
> The avenue as I approach.

The grief-stricken speaker idealizes her mother in her memory. Instead of being like "ivy" (clingy, smothering, intrusive), her mother transforms into a "tree" (that is, she becomes a sturdy, sheltering presence in the speaker's mind). And yet, the speaker continues, this tree-mother "hops away like a rainbow" whenever the speaker approaches.

Rainbows are only visible from a distance: they recede or

disappear when you try to get close to them. The simile conveys the speaker's futile longing to be close to her mother; she keeps trying to hold onto her mother in her memory, to take shelter under that "tree," but her mother continually eludes the speaker's grasp. The speaker never actually gets the comfort she craves. Note, too, that rainbows aren't tangible objects; they're just a trick of light and perception. This simile thus further reflects the fact that this version of the mother isn't *real*; she's a figment of the speaker's grieving imagination.

There's also some heartbreakingly whimsical about the imagery of this simile: hopping rainbows sound like something out of a children's book. Instead of connoting happy childhood memories, however, the speaker is using this image to describe an absence that taunts her well into adulthood.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Lines 9-11:** "The ivy-mother turned into a tree / That still hops away like a rainbow down / The avenue as I approach."

ANAPHORA

Anaphora appears twice in the poem. First, in line 23, the speaker uses anaphora when describing the archetypal "lost woman" who inspires so many "heroes" and "poet[s]." This figure is one "Who will not alter, who will not grow." In other words, she never changes or matures; she's forever stuck as the woman she was at the moment of her death (in the minds of these heroes/poets, at least). The rhythmic repetition here drives home the idea that when people idealize the dead, they make them *static* and rob them of what made them human. They become stationary ideas rather than people.

There is more anaphora in lines 33-36, as the speaker imagines her mother saying:

> I sacrificed too much perhaps,
> I showed you the way to rise above me
> [...]
> *I* am not lost.

The repetition of "I" is significant: it foregrounds the mother's presence in the poem. This anaphora helps to convey the way that the speaker's guilt and regret overpower her, granting an imagined version of her mother a voice that drowns out the speaker's own. Her mother gets the last word here.

Where Anaphora appears in the poem:

- **Line 23:** "Who will not alter, who will not grow,"
- **Lines 33-34:** "I sacrificed too much perhaps, / I showed you the way to rise above me"
- **Lines 36-36:** "I / am not lost."

CONSONANCE

Occasional consonance (and more specific alliteration) makes the speaker's language more intense while also calling readers' attention to important images and ideas in the poem. For example, the booming alliteration of "bright voice and a bad pain" evokes the very *brightness* of that voice and the *intensity* of that pain. The /b/ sounds make these phrases more dramatic. Similarly, the breathy /h/ alliteration of "haunt the home" in the fourth stanza emphasizes this clichéd vision of the "lost woman," that "benign" figure who gently inspires great men and "poets."

Elsewhere, the poem's sounds help to make its imagery more vivid. Toward the end of the first stanza, for example, more bold /b/ sounds combine with spiky /k/ sounds to convey the speaker's utter shock at losing her mother so suddenly:

> And where the brook goes under the lane
> I saw the back of a shocking white
> Ambulance [...]

The lines sound brittle and sharp, in turn conveying the speaker's pain and surprise.

The sibilance of the fifth stanza similarly brings the scene at hand to life, those whispery /s/ sounds conveying the gentleness with which this unobstrusive "lost woman" moves:

> Is not to stride at dead of night.
> Soft and crepuscular in rabbit-

In contrast, the sibilance in lines 31-33 makes the mother's voice sound like the sinister hiss of a snake:

> But my lost woman evermore snaps
> From somewhere else: "you did not love me.
> I sacrificed too much perhaps,

All those /s/ sounds transform the mother into a threatening, vengeful presence.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "My mother," "went with," "warning"
- **Line 2:** "bright," "bad"
- **Line 4:** "brook"
- **Line 5:** "back," "shocking"
- **Line 6:** "Ambulance"
- **Line 9:** "turned into," "tree"
- **Line 12:** "tendrils," "clutch"
- **Line 17:** "met," "match"
- **Line 18:** "summer school"
- **Line 21:** "haunt," "home"
- **Line 24:** "need never," "know"

- **Line 25:** "Her habit"
- **Line 26:** "stride"
- **Line 27:** "Soft," "crepuscular"
- **Line 28:** "comes," "Hear how," "hate"
- **Line 31:** "lost," "snaps"
- **Line 32:** "somewhere else"
- **Line 33:** "sacrificed," "perhaps"

ENJAMBMENT

Enjambment helps to fill the poem with both momentum and anticipation. The first line, for example, is enjambed, leaving the reader hanging with the word "warning":

> My mother went with no more warning
> than a bright voice and a bad pain.

By breaking the opening line off after "warning," enjambment creates a brief moment of suspense: where is it that the speaker's mother has gone, readers wonder? In this way, enjambment evokes the suspense and dread that the speaker must have felt in this situation, unsure for a moment of what has happened to her mother.

The enjambment of lines 3-6 then pulls the reader down the page, mirroring the speed with which this traumatic event unfolded:

> Home from school on a June morning
> And where the brook goes under the lane
> I saw the back of a shocking white
> Ambulance drawing away from the gate.

The poem steadily plows ahead, conveying just how swiftly the speaker's mother disappeared from her life. Readers can't stop the poem any more than the speaker can't stop this situation from unfolding.

The enjambment of the next stanza works similarly, as the speaker describes the way her mother's memory remains always out of reach:

> The ivy-mother turned into a tree
> That still hopes away like a rainbow down
> The avenue as I approach.

The speaker's mother keeps slipping away from her, a fact reflected by the way that the poem keeps slipping down the page. The poem keeps moving just as the speaker keeps chasing after her mother.

Note, too, how the poem plays with the contrast between enjambments and end-stopped lines. In the fourth stanza, the first two lines are enjambed, followed by a string of end-stopped lines:

> Many a hero in his time
> And every poet has acquired
> A lost woman to haunt the home,
> To be compensated and desired,
> Who will not alter, who will not grow,
> A corpse they need never get to know.

After the enjambments, the string of end-stops feels flat and lifeless, much like the "corpse[s]" of "lost women."

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "warning / than"
- **Lines 3-4:** "morning / And"
- **Lines 4-5:** "lane / I"
- **Lines 5-6:** "white / Ambulance"
- **Lines 7-8:** "saw / Her"
- **Lines 9-10:** "tree / That"
- **Lines 10-11:** "down / The"
- **Lines 14-15:** "marriage / She"
- **Lines 16-17:** "village / She"
- **Lines 17-18:** "extra-mural / Class"
- **Lines 19-20:** "time / And"
- **Lines 20-21:** "acquired / A"
- **Lines 25-26:** "habit / Is"
- **Lines 27-28:** "rabbit- / Light"
- **Lines 28-29:** "hate / Themselves"
- **Lines 31-32:** "snaps / From"
- **Lines 34-35:** "me / And"
- **Lines 35-36:** "ghost / With"

VOCABULARY

Ivy-mother (Line 9) - *Ivy* is a climbing, invasive vine that often chokes other plants, inhibiting their growth. Thus, the speaker is suggesting that her mother was overbearing.

Tendrils (Line 12) - In climbing plants, the tendril is a thin, leafless stem that attaches itself to other objects for support. The speaker is using the word metaphorically to reflect her longing to hold onto her mother's memory.

Canteen (Line 15) - A snack bar or small restaurant/cafeteria in a military camp.

Wit (Line 16) - A particularly smart, perceptive, and articulate individual.

Cliché-ridden (Line 16) - Overrun with unoriginal ideas or expressions.

OU summer school (Lines 17-18) - A reference to the Open University, a research university in the UK where most students study off campus.

Extra-mural (Lines 17-18) - Extracurricular.

Compensated (Line 22) - Repaid or made amends to. The word implies heroes and poets must repay the "lost women" who "haunt" their homes, perhaps by undertaking noble tasks in their honor or creating art inspired by them.

Alter (Line 23) - Change.

Benign (Line 25) - Harmless.

Stride (Lines 25-26) - Walk purposefully.

Crepuscular (Lines 27-28) - Active or emerging in twilight.

Rabbit-light (Lines 27-28) - Rabbits are crepuscular (active in the evening), so this is just a poetic way of saying evening light.

Bland (Line 30) - Dull and boring.

Chide (Line 30) - Criticize or chastise.

Evermore (Line 31) - Always.

Bat-voice (Lines 35-36) - This metaphor can be interpreted in a few ways. For one thing, bats' voices are too high-pitched for human ears; as such, this might be a poetic way of saying the speaker is practically voiceless. Bats also use echolocation to navigate their surroundings, which might reflect the way the speaker's voice echoes around in her own mind.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"The Lost Mother" can be considered a kind of elegy, as the speaker is reflecting on her relationship with her dead mother. Structurally, the poem is made up of 36 lines arranged into six sestets (six-line stanzas). It doesn't follow a traditional form (such as a sonnet or villanelle), nor does it use a regular meter. That said, the poem is not truly free verse: it uses a steady stanza length and there's a subtle rhyme scheme at work. Overall, the poem feels controlled rather than freewheeling; musical but not showy or overly dramatic.

METER

The poem doesn't use a regular meter. Its language feels modern and even prose-like at times, as though the speaker is having an intimate, off-the-cuff conversation with the reader. On the one hand, the irregularity of the poem's meter keeps readers on their toes; there's no chance of being lulled into complacency by a predictable rhythm. At the same time, however, the poem's lines are all roughly the same length (most are between eight and ten syllables long). This keeps the poem feeling somewhat measured and calm.

RHYME SCHEME

The poem follows an ABABCC rhyme scheme. The first and third lines of every stanza rhyme, as do the second and fourth lines. Each stanza then ends with a couplet. Here's the first stanza as an example:

[...] warning A
[...] pain. B
[...] morning A
[...] lane B
[...] white C
[...] gate. C

Most of these rhymes are slant, however, as with "white" and "gate" above (which echo each other only in that /t/ consonance). The second stanza is also missing its A rhymes ("saw" doesn't rhyme with "tree"). The poem's music is thus subtle, at times fading into nothing more than a faint pulse in the background of the poem.

SPEAKER

The speaker lost her mother suddenly when she was home for summer vacation. Since Beer lost her own mother at the age of 14, it's safe to assume the speaker is a version of the poet and is also quite young when her mother dies (though the poem doesn't specify her age).

The speaker clearly has complicated feelings toward her mother. The phrasing of "My mother went" and "She never returned" makes it sound like the mother had a *choice* in dying and that the speaker resents her mother, at least at first, for leaving her behind.

Not having had the chance to say goodbye or even witness her mother being buried, the speaker romanticizes her mother in her memory. She imagines her as a "tree": a solid, sheltering presence rather than a suffocating one. And yet, this tree hops away each time the speaker approaches, an image implying that the speaker maintains an unfulfilled yearning to be close to her mother. Though her mother was like "ivy"—smothering and clingy—in real life, in death it's the speaker who tries to "clutch" her mother, to hold onto her memory.

The poem further implies that the speaker feels guilt and regret about her relationship with her mother. She imagines her mother's voice snapping at her from beyond the grave, accusing the speaker of not loving her enough and of ungraciously "ris[ing] above her"—that is, of surpassing her mother while taking her "sacrifice[s]" for granted.

This voice that the speaker hears is really a manifestation of her own guilt and regret. In the end, the speaker feels "lost" without her mother: unsure of herself, like a "ghost" stumbling through the dark as her mother's voice echoes in her head.

SETTING

The poem is set in the speaker's present: now an adult, the speaker is looking back on how her mother's death has shaped her life.

She begins by describing the day the speaker's mother died: it was in early summer and the speaker was still a child, living at home. It isn't clear whether the speaker was inside and heard her mother's cry of "pain" and then ran out after the "Ambulance," or if the speaker had just gotten home from school in time to see the ambulance pulling away. Either way, the loss was sudden and shocking.

As the speaker describes "the years" that followed her mother's death, the poem's setting becomes more metaphorical. For example, the speaker imagines chasing after her mother much as one might chase after a rainbow, something that feels forever just out of reach.

The poem switches to the present tense about halfway through, reminding readers that many years have passed since the speaker's mother died. The speaker has since lived long enough to "rise above" her mother: to take advantage of opportunities her mother never got. Yet still, to this day, the speaker says that her mother "evermore snaps" at her. This time jump conveys just how impactful her mother's death was. Decades later, she's still plagued by guilt and regret.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

The English poet Patricia Beer was born in 1919 to a strict Plymouth Brethren family. The beliefs and practices of the Plymouth Brethren, a fundamentalist Christian movement, limited Beer from learning much about the outside world as a child. Beer cut ties with the Brethren as a young adult, but the austerity of her childhood influenced much of her life and writing.

Beer first published "The Lost Woman" in a 1982 issue of the *London Review of Books* and later included it in her 1983 collection *The Lie of the Land*. The poem takes its cues from Beer's life story: Beer had a complicated relationship with her mother, who died of cancer when Beer was just 14.

Beer resisted many of the trends and conventions of her time, evading both the extreme experimentation of the modernists and the intensely autobiographical revelations of the Confessionalists—a "mode which," she said, "though I respect it, is not for me." Many of her poems (including "The Lost Woman") are quite personal, but they maintain a certain degree of authorial distance and aren't overly sentimental.

Though Beer never attempted to imitate any particular poet or school of writing, she was deeply inspired by 18th-century English poet Thomas Gray (in particular, his unfinished poem "Ode on the Pleasures Arising from Vicissitude"). She also admired English novelist and poet Stevie Smith, who was her contemporary and with whom she became friends.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Beer grew up among The Plymouth Brethren, a very conservative Christian group. Of her upbringing, Beer once wrote:

> We were brought up in isolation from the history of the time. This was partly a rural isolation; Devon was really remote in those days, and London almost inaccessible except to the rich, though as a family we did quite well in this respect, having four free passes a year on the railway and any number of privilege tickets. National happenings were far away. But in our case it was also religious. Politics was for the children of this world. [....] There was almost nothing Brethren were allowed to do.

Beer wrote a detailed memoir of these years titled *Mrs. Beer's House*, which ends with her mother's sudden death from cancer in 1933. Beer was only 14 when she lost her mother, and despite her mother's domineering presence throughout most of the book, it's clear that Beer loved her and carried tender memories of their time together. Though her mother was exacting, she was also proud of Beer's literary talent.

Published 50 years after her mother's death, "The Lost Woman" recounts the devastating repercussions of this traumatic and formative event. Not only were Beer and her sister not allowed to attend their mother's funeral, they were also forbidden from seeing her at the end of her life, making her absence feel even more abrupt and unreal.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Poet's Voice — Listen to Beer read "The Lost Woman" aloud. (https://poetryarchive.org/poet/patricia-beer/)
- Patricia Beer's Obituary — Read this Independent article about Beer's life and legacy. (https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/obituary-patricia-beer-1115351.html)
- "Compassion in Strange Places": An Essay on Beer's Life and Work — Learn about the events that shaped Beer's life and poetry. (https://thefridaypoem.com/compassion-in-strange-places/)
- Who Are the Plymouth Brethren? — Read about the fundamentalist Christian sect whose beliefs shaped Beer's upbringing. (https://www.somersetlive.co.uk/news/somerset-news/who-are-the-plymouth-brethren-140380#:~:text=What%20makes%20Brethren%20a
- Second Chances: A Look at Beer's Collected Poems — Check out an in-depth review of Beer's work via the

London Review of Books. (https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v15/n14/donald-davie/second-chances)

HOW TO CITE

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