Foreign

SUMMARY

The speaker urges you, the reader, to imagine living for two decades in a drab foreign city. You live in one of the various dreary buildings on the city's east side. When you talk on a landing of your building's staircase, you can hear your foreign-sounding voice echo in the stairwell. Although you speak in your adopted language, you think in your native language.

The speaker tells you to imagine writing a letter home. Your inner voice speaks the words you're writing in the local variant of your native language, which, in turn, makes you think of the distant sound of your mom's singing. You start to cry, but you're not sure why, and you can't even think of the word for "crying."

You ride public transportation (i.e., buses and metros), go to work, and then go to sleep. One night (the speaker asks you to imagine), you noticed a name for your ethnic/racial group spelled in red graffiti on a brick wall. It was a slur written in blood-red paint. Now, snow is falling in the neon-lit streets of the city, as if your adopted country were crumbling right in front of you.

Occasionally, in the deli, you still get confused by the local currency. Unable to communicate properly, because this new country still isn't home, you gesture toward the fruit you want to buy. Either you or the deli worker says (in awkward-sounding grammar), "I can't understand these people. It's like they're not even fully conscious." The speaker again urges you to imagine what this would be like.

THEMES

IMMIGRATION AND ALIENATION

"Foreign" invites readers to imagine themselves as an immigrant in an unfamiliar and often hostile country. The poem depicts a series of common challenges experienced by immigrants, including learning a new language and currency, missing one's home, struggling financially, and encountering xenophobia. In describing these experiences in ominous, even nightmarish terms, the speaker links life at the social margins with a profound sense of alienation and disorientation. Being "foreign," the poem suggests, can cut people off not only from those around them but from their own identity and sense of reality.

The poem shows how being "foreign" makes everyday life more complicated, stressful, and isolating. When you're a non-native speaker of the language surrounding you, the poem observes, you "think" in a different language than you "talk" in—undoubtedly a confusing sensation that would make it hard to communicate (and thus to get to know locals or have them get to know you). Even after "twenty years," you might still be confused by things like currency ("coins" that "will not translate") and feel "[i]narticulate" while trying to do something as simple as buy a piece of "fruit."

You don't always have the ability to name, and thus recognize, your own emotions, either. For example, when tearing up, you might struggle to think of "the word for" crying. The poem thus shows how being "foreign" can make even the most familiar items and experiences seem frustratingly alien.

For these reasons, an immigrant's adopted homeland can remain "strange," never becoming a true "home." Illustrating this idea, the poem asks readers to imagine a foreigner living in the same "dismal dwellings" for decades, on a particular "side" of the city—in other words, leading an impoverished, isolated life at the social margins. That life itself becomes nothing but a lonely, exhausting routine: "You use the public transport. Work. Sleep," the speaker says, just getting by rather than really living.

And when you do think of your actual "home," the poem continues, you hear "your mother singing": an image of the kind of welcoming, loving environment that now seems lost for good. At its worst, the poem suggests, the experience of "foreignness" can be a sort of trauma, like separation from one's mother as a child.

It's not just that foreigners themselves struggle to fit in, however, but that society actively *excludes* them. The poem describes hateful graffiti directed at foreigners, making the current environment seem not only alienating but menacing. You might encounter hateful language and recognize it as "a name for yourself," the speaker says—"a hate name." This detail further suggests that society's suspicion of foreigners is part of what keeps them trapped in a cycle of alienation and frustration.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-20

XENOPHOBIA, INTOLERANCE, AND MISCOMMUNICATION

The poem depicts a scenario in which an immigrant still struggles with their adopted country's language and practices after 20 years. At the same time, that country has never fully accepted this person or bridged that cultural divide: in fact, its "hate" for foreigners seems to be getting worse. The poem then imagines an encounter between this foreigner and a deli worker in which both parties seem unable to

communicate—and at least one of whom seems unable to empathize with the other. By helping readers "Imagine" this scenario and identify with the "foreigner" (whom the speaker refers to as "you" throughout), the poem illustrates the cruelty of intolerance and encourages the kind of empathy that curbs it.

The poem shows how linguistic and cultural barriers can become barriers to empathy and humanity by imagining an encounter between an immigrant and a deli worker (who might be a native resident or an immigrant from a different culture), in which "one of you" complains: "*Me not know what these people mean. / It like they only go to bed and dream*."

Either one of these people or both fail to grasp or appreciate the inner reality of the other. That is, they don't consider that the person they're talking to is a full, unique human being rather than just one of the "these people." Notice, too, how the ungrammatical speech here resembles the kind often assigned to cavemen and "primitive" peoples in popular culture, perhaps evoking crude stereotypes of foreigners and the crudeness of intolerance itself.

In extreme cases, the poem thus suggests, cultural divides and misunderstandings can generate an almost primitive fear and hatred. Further illustrating this, the poem mentions a "hate name" sprayed "Red like blood" on a public wall: an image of savage cruelty toward strangers. The hate speech is framed as a possible sign that "this [place] is coming to bits"—that is, intolerance and social divisions are plunging society into chaos.

Yet by urging readers to "Imagine" this situation, the poem promotes empathy and understanding over the kind of misunderstanding it portrays. The poem's details help put readers in the "foreigner's" shoes and better understand certain parts of the immigrant experience. And the suggestion that "this place" might be "coming to bits" is a warning that if cultural barriers aren't bridged, they can destroy societies. The dry closing words, "Imagine that," drive home a key irony: this whole "imagined" scenario often reflects reality. But "Imagine that" can also be taken literally and sincerely: that is, the poem wants readers to *keep* empathizing with "foreigners," marginalized people, etc. and considering the challenges they face.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 4-5
- Lines 11-20

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-5

Imagine living in ...
... talk in theirs.

The first stanza establishes the poem's setting, as well as its main character: "you." These opening fives lines begin to sketch a particular immigrant story, asking "you" to adopt this "Foreign" person's perspective and "Imagine" their experience.

In the scenario the poem lays out, "you" have been living in the same "strange, dark" foreign city "for twenty years." It seems you have struggled financially, possibly as a result of discrimination, because even after two decades, you're still living among "dismal dwellings on the east side" of the city. The poem never specifies a geographical location or time period, so it's hard to know exactly what "the east side" holds, but the general idea is that it's a poorer or less desirable part of town. It may be an area that residents have a hard time escaping due to exclusion and lack of opportunity elsewhere.

However, it doesn't seem to be a community of immigrants like yourself, since you're acutely aware of your "foreign[ness]" in this environment. In the stairwell of your building, "you hear / your foreign accent echo," as if the walls are throwing your difference back in your face. Even after two decades, you haven't fully adjusted to your adopted country's culture: "You think / in a language of your own and talk in theirs." You feel divided against yourself—and divided from the native residents, too: the collective "th[em]" who seem like foreigners to *you*.

This opening establishes the poem's form: cinquain stanzas with lines of roughly even length, but no meter or rhyme. Frequent enjambment and caesuras give the lines a halting rhythm, and the diction is generally plain. These effects help evoke the difficulty of speaking in a second language, guiding the reader into the mindset of the "you" the poem describes. If the language were smoothly rhythmic, elaborately rhymed, and full of fancy vocabulary, it wouldn't fit the character or subject matter well. Moreover, cinquain stanzas are relatively uncommon in English poetry, so they have the potential to seem a bit "foreign."

At the same time, touches of alliteration (e.g., "dismal dwellings"), internal rhyme ("stairs"/"theirs"), and imperfect or slant rhyme ("years"/"hear," "years"/"theirs") suggest some effort to organize the poem's language—perhaps reflecting the way "you" have tried to master a foreign tongue. The stanza pattern and roughly even line lengths add some consistency to the free verse, perhaps hinting that "you" aren't truly free in this setting.

LINES 6-10

Then you are ...
... word for this.

Lines 6-10 create a juxtaposition between the bleak, alien atmosphere of the first stanza and the poignant memory of "home." These lines show that, even (or especially) after 20 years abroad, the "you" of the poem remains homesick for the land they left behind.

While "writing home," your mind hears the "letter" in the "local dialect" you grew up with. That memory leads to another: "the sound of your mother singing to you, / all that time ago." This nostalgic reminiscence, in turn, brings tears to your eyes, although you're not sure why—and can't think of the word for "tears" or "crying":

> [...] now you do not know
> why your eyes are watering and what's the word for
> this.

The reader understands, however, that "your eyes are watering" due to homesickness. Presumably, you're struggling with the vocabulary of your *adopted* language, although it's possible that you've lived away from home for so long that you've lost some fluency in your *native* language.

Just as the poem doesn't specify where "you" live now, it doesn't reveal where "home" used to be. Nor does it say how long "all that time ago" was; in other words, it doesn't reveal "your" age, how old you were when you immigrated, or whether your mother and other older relatives are still alive.

Heavy alliteration ("letter"/"local," "sound"/"singing," "now"/"not"/"know," "Why"/"watering"/"what's"/"word"), combined with assonance and internal rhyme ("letter"/"dialect," "dialect"/"behind," "ago"/"know," "Why"/"eyes"), adds a pleasant musicality to these lines about music, love, and the pleasures of home.

LINES 11-15

You use the ...
... before your eyes.

Lines 11-15 depict a disturbing encounter with xenophobia: that is, the fear or hatred of foreigners.

The immigrant, or the "you" of the poem, follows a humble daily routine: "us[ing] the public transport," "Work[ing]," and "[Sleep]ing." But the speaker tells the reader to "Imagine" that you were "one night" jolted out of this routine. You came across "a name for yourself"—"A hate name"—that was "sprayed in red / against a brick wall." In other words, you came across some city graffiti that you recognized as a slur against your race, ethnicity, or religion.

The simple simile "Red like blood" connects this brightly painted slur with violence, suggesting that xenophobia will cause, or has already caused, bloodshed in your adopted country. Long /a/ assonance links "name," "sprayed," and "hate name," making the words themselves seem to stand out from their lines just as the red paint stands out from the wall.

Returning to the present tense, the stanza ends on an image of potential social collapse:

> It is snowing in the streets, under the neon lights,
> as if this place were coming to bits before your eyes.

The combination of snow and garish lights is described in ominous terms, as if the falling, eerily lit flakes were pieces of a crumbling society. The implication is that xenophobia—which may already have hurt immigrants economically, ensuring that their lives remain a daily grind of commuting, "Work," and "Sleep"—might soon plunge this country into outright violence.

Like most of the poem, this stanza uses parataxis to present details in an almost random-seeming sequence, without connective phrases to put them in logical order. Notice how time seems to jump around here, as the stanza mixes together habitual actions (e.g., "Work. Sleep"), a specific incident from the past ("You saw a name for yourself"), and present-tense action ("It is snowing"). The result is a collage-like effect that forces the reader to make sense of the overall picture.

LINES 16-20

And in the ...
... Imagine that.

The poem concludes with an ambiguous incident in a "delicatessen": an encounter that seems to illustrate how language and cultural barriers can cause deeper divisions in society.

In the poem's imagined scenario, "you" still get confused sometimes by the currency of your adopted country, even after living there for 20 years:

> And in the delicatessen, from time to time, the coins
> in your palm will not translate.

In loosely figurative language, these lines imply that you still occasionally forget the value of (or perhaps the names of) particular coins. Thus, while shopping at the deli ("delicatessen"), you sometimes have awkward moments of confusion. You're then forced to "point at the fruit" you want, feeling "Inarticulate" (unable to communicate well) "because this is not home." In other words, even after two decades living there, your adopted country still doesn't feel comfortable or welcoming. The country you were born in still feels like your real home.

The speaker then tells you to "Imagine" something curious that "one of you says"—apparently meaning either you or the worker you're speaking with at the deli. (Although "one of you" might also refer, metaphorically, to one of the two voices you carry inside you: those of your native and adopted language.) The phrases that follow sound almost like an exaggerated version of awkward, non-native speech (not necessarily in English):

> *Me not know what these people mean.*
> *It like they only go to bed and dream.*

This statement allows for various interpretations, but three things are fairly clear:

1. It's an expression of frustration at not being able to understand someone's speech in an everyday situation.
2. It's also an expression of annoyance with, or contempt for, "these people," meaning "foreigners" or people who are most comfortable speaking a different language than your own.
3. It suggests that "these people" are either lazy, have no inner reality that you can understand, or both. Basically, they don't quite seem real: because you can't communicate with them, it's as if they're dreaming or sleepwalking.

Again, either "one of you" could be saying this: in other words, fear and distrust of "foreigners" might exist on either side of this cultural barrier. The "you" of the poem is clearly an oppressed minority within their adopted country, but the poem shows, here, how xenophobia can create a two-way distrust—a tragic deepening of divisions. It also implies that xenophobia leads people on either side of a language/cultural barrier to dismiss, disdain, or dehumanize one another.

The final words of the poem, "Imagine that," have an ironic ring, but also make a sincere point. Taken ironically or sarcastically, they seem to say: "Just *imagine* a world in which these barriers and prejudices exist." In other words, we're clearly living in that world now. Taken sincerely, however, "Imagine that" is a call to keep imagining, and empathizing with, the experiences of people who are different than yourself. In a way, the speaker asks the reader to keep doing the work the poem has been doing.

SYMBOLS

REDNESS/BLOOD

Lines 12-13 describe a "hate name" for foreigners that has been "sprayed in red"—"Red like blood"—on a wall. This blood-red paint symbolizes the threat of violence. The implication is that xenophobia has been brewing in this country and may soon erupt into violence (if it hasn't already). In fact, the following lines, which envision "this place [...] coming to bits," suggest that hatred of foreigners might plunge this whole society into bloody turmoil.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 11-13:** "Imagine one night / You saw a name for yourself sprayed in red / against a brick wall. A hate name. Red like blood."

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

The poem uses alliteration to accentuate important phrases and add a little musicality to its free verse.

For example, heavy /d/ sounds accentuate "dismal dwellings" in line 2, drawing extra attention to "your" (the foreigner's) impoverished circumstances. The /s/ and /b/ alliteration in lines 14-15 ("snowing"/"streets"; "bits before") heighten the intensity of these key lines, which hint that this xenophobic society might be deteriorating into violence. The /b/ words even sound a bit jarring or explosive.

More subtly, the /t/ sounds in lines 16-17 ("time"/"time"/"translate") underline words that resonate with the poem's themes—especially "translate," since the poem is so much about language and miscommunication.

As for musicality, there's a lot of it in the second stanza, a nostalgic passage that refers to "singing" and to the language of one's homeland:

> [...] Recites the letter in a local dialect; behind that
> Is the sound of your mother singing to you,
> All that time ago, and now you do not know
> Why your eyes are watering and what's the word for
> this.

Liquid /l/ and /w/ sounds, soft /s/ sounds, and nasal /n/ sounds heighten the lyricism of the language, drawing out the beauty and sadness of this musical memory. Alliteration even helps stress the word "singing" itself!

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "dismal dwellings"
- **Line 7:** "letter," "local"
- **Line 8:** "sound," "singing"
- **Line 9:** "now," "not know"
- **Line 10:** "Why," "watering," "what's," "word"
- **Line 14:** "snowing," "streets"
- **Line 15:** "bits before"
- **Line 16:** "time," "time"
- **Line 17:** "translate"

ASSONANCE

Assonance and internal rhyme (created through a mixture of assonance and consonance) add to the poem's musicality in subtle, yet powerful ways.

As a free verse poem, "Foreign" doesn't have a rhyme scheme, but these two devices add little touches of chiming lyricism here and there. For example, there's an internal rhyme between "stairs" and "theirs" (which end their respective sentences) in

lines 4-5, and a similar effect in lines 19-20, where "*mean*" and "*dream*" (which also end sentences) are linked by long /ee/ assonance. Generally, the language of the poem is plain rather than fancy, evoking the relatively simple vocabulary one uses when speaking in a foreign tongue. But perhaps these rhymes or near-rhymes suggest an attempt to put the language in order—to gain some mastery over it.

Assonance also links "ago" and "know" in line 9 and "Why" and "eyes" in line 10. Together with the assonance in "letter"/"dialect" and "dialect"/"behind" (line 7), these sound effects add musicality to the second stanza: a nostalgic passage about home, love, and "singing." This stanza also involves the memory of your native "dialect"—the language you *don't* struggle with—so it's no surprise that the poem's language flows more pleasantly here.

Finally, long /ay/ sounds link "name," "sprayed," and "hate name" in lines 12-13:

> You saw a name for yourself sprayed in red
> against a brick wall. A hate name. Red like blood.

The assonance makes this disturbing image stand out sharply, like bright red paint on a wall.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "stairs"
- **Line 5:** "theirs"
- **Line 7:** "letter," "dialect," "behind"
- **Line 9:** "ago," "know"
- **Line 10:** "Why," "eyes"
- **Line 12:** "name," "sprayed"
- **Line 13:** "hate name"
- **Line 19:** "mean"
- **Line 20:** "only go," "dream"

CAESURA

The poem contains a number of caesuras, which give it a slightly choppy rhythm. This rhythm might be meant to evoke speech that's a bit halting or awkward, as when someone's not fully comfortable speaking a foreign language. Or, at least, it prevents the poem from sounding *too* fluid and musical, since that style wouldn't fit a poem about feeling "Inarticulate" (line 17).

Quite a few of the poem's caesuras are marked with periods; in other words, the poem's sentences often end in the middle of a line. This effect adds to the choppy, stop-and-start rhythm, but it can also add dramatic emphasis, as in lines 11-13:

> You use the public transport. Work. Sleep. Imagine
> one night
> You saw a name for yourself sprayed in red
> against a brick wall. A hate name. Red like blood.

In line 11, the periods help evoke the simplicity and monotony of the "foreigner's" routine: "You use the public transport. Work. Sleep." In line 13, they add a punchy, dramatic quality to the most disturbing image in the poem: that of the "hate name" sprayed on a public wall. The sharp, staccato rhythm underscores the tension of this moment, conveying both the violent "hate" behind the slur and the shock of seeing it in one's city.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "strange, dark"
- **Line 3:** "yours. On"
- **Line 4:** "stairs. You"
- **Line 6:** "home. The"
- **Line 7:** "dialect; behind"
- **Line 9:** "ago, and"
- **Line 11:** "transport. Work. Sleep. Imagine"
- **Line 13:** "wall. A," "name. Red"
- **Line 14:** "streets, under"
- **Line 17:** "translate. Inarticulate"
- **Line 18:** "home, you," "fruit. Imagine"
- **Lines 19-19:** "says, / Me"
- **Lines 20-20:** "dream. / Imagine"

ENJAMBMENT

Half of the lines in the poem are enjambed rather than end-stopped. By breaking phrases apart across multiple lines, these enjambments add to the poem's slightly halting rhythm. That rhythm, in turn, seems to reflect the poem's subject: language difficulties, feelings of "Inarticula[cy]" (see line 17), and so on. It helps make the poem feel conversational and varies its pace and rhythm, sometimes evoking moments of hesitation or confusion—as in the enjambment after "coins" (line 16), which occurs when the "you" of the poem is confused about currency:

> And in the delicatessen, from time to time, the coins
> in your palm will not translate. Inarticulate,

Enjambment can also draw attention to an important word or phrase just before or after the line break. Notice, for example, how the enjambment in lines 12-13 highlights the word "red," making it stand out much as the color does:

> You saw a name for yourself sprayed in red
> against a brick wall. A hate name. Red like blood.

Enjambment places even more emphasis on "Imagine" in line 18, since it's the one word in its sentence that falls before the line break:

> because this is not home, you point at the fruit.
> Imagine
> that one of you says, *Me not know what these people mean.*

In general, *imagine* is an important word in "Foreign": it's repeated four times (lines 1, 11, 18, and 20), and it's the first and next-to-last word of the poem. The way enjambment highlights it here hints at its broader significance and sets up the ending ("Imagine that"), which makes clear that imaginative empathy—the ability to put yourself in others' shoes—is a core theme of the poem.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-3:** "side / and"
- **Lines 3-4:** "hear / your"
- **Lines 4-5:** "think / in"
- **Lines 6-7:** "head / Recites"
- **Lines 7-8:** "that / Is"
- **Lines 11-12:** "night / You"
- **Lines 12-13:** "red / against"
- **Lines 16-17:** "coins / in"
- **Lines 18-19:** "Imagine / that"

REPETITION

The poem's most important repeated word is "Imagine," which begins four different sentences (lines 1, 11, 18, 20). It's both the first and the next-to-last word in the poem, so it clearly has some thematic significance.

Basically, the poem is trying to expand the reader's empathetic imagination: their ability to put themselves in others' shoes and understand what they're going through. It urges the reader to empathize with immigrants—especially those who speak a "foreign" language—by imagining their daily routines, challenges, and fears. For readers who may not have experienced xenophobia firsthand, it provides a glimpse of what this experience is like.

The poem also repeats the word "name" as a way of providing delayed clarification. It specifies that the "name for yourself sprayed in red / against a brick wall" is "A hate name" (lines 12-13). The repetition (technically, diacope) adds dramatic emphasis to the revelation that this "name," in fact, is a slur.

The word "home" also appears twice in the poem: first as a description of the place "you" left behind (the place "you are writing" to in line 6), then in reference to your adopted country, which is definitely "not home" (line 18). This contrast is especially sharp because, in the scenario the poem lays out, "you" have been living in your adopted country for 20 years. Even after all that time, your adopted country still feels "foreign"—and you're still treated as a foreigner there—whereas your old country and community still feel like home.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Imagine"
- **Line 6:** "home"
- **Line 11:** "Imagine"
- **Line 12:** "name"
- **Line 13:** "name"
- **Line 16:** "time," "time"
- **Line 18:** "home," "Imagine"
- **Line 20:** "Imagine"

SIMILE

Several similes appear toward the end of the poem. The first of these is very simple: the "hate name" sprayed on the brick wall is described as "Red like blood" (line 13). This comparison links the "hate" that motivated the slur with the bloody violence it could cause, or is already causing, in this society.

Another simile, or analogy, then links weather with social catastrophe (lines 14-15):

> It is snowing in the streets, under the neon lights,
> as if this place were coming to bits before your eyes.

The falling snowflakes, backed by the garish neon lights, seem as if they could be tiny pieces of this crumbling society. The cold, harsh weather seems to be analogous to the bleak social atmosphere.

Finally, the poem's closing lines contain a complex, ambiguous simile, seemingly phrased as an imitation of a "foreigner's" awkward speech:

> [...] Imagine
> that one of you says, *Me not know what these people mean.*
> *It like they only go to bed and dream.*

This comparison expresses frustration with, and even disdain for, people with whom one is unable to communicate clearly in a shared language. Perhaps "these people"—itself a hostile, generalizing term—seem lazy, as if they're asleep all the time. Or perhaps they seem to lack an inner reality, as if they're just dreaming their way through life. Either way, the comparison is harsh and dismissive. It's not clear whether this dismissiveness is coming from the "foreigner" or the "native" resident in this situation: it could be either, and that's part of the point. Language barriers can be profoundly divisive in the absence of tolerance and empathy; they can make people on the other side of the barrier seem distant, exasperating, or even less than fully real.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Line 13:** “Red like blood.”
- **Lines 14-15:** “It is snowing in the streets, under the neon lights, / as if this place were coming to bits before your eyes.”
- **Lines 19-20:** “Me not know what these people mean. / It like they only go to bed and dream.”

PARATAXIS

The poem makes heavy use of parataxis; in fact, its style is basically paratactic throughout. Rather than spelling out the logical or cause-and-effect connections between sentences and clauses—using words/phrases like "so," "then," "because," "before/after that," etc.—the poem places sentences/clauses beside each other and leaves the reader to work out the relationship. The result is a kind of collage effect, in which elements come together to form an overall picture. Take lines 11-15:

> You use the public transport. Work. Sleep. Imagine one night
> You saw a name for yourself sprayed in red
> against a brick wall. A hate name. Red like blood.
> It is snowing in the streets, under the neon lights,
> as if this place were coming to bits before your eyes.

Notice that there's no attempt, here, to present events in a logical order. The stanza moves from talking about repeated daily activity ("You use the public transport. Work. Sleep") to a particular past incident (something you "saw" "one night") to present action ("It is snowing in the streets"), without clear transitions to signal how all these things fit together. Instead, the reader is left to assemble these disparate details into an overall understanding of "your" (the "foreigner's") experience. In fact, the parataxis might be a way of suggesting that the "you" of the poem feels disoriented and alienated: that "you" have lost an ordinary sense of time and logic in this hostile environment.

There are a couple of non-paratactic moments in the poem: the second stanza contains "Then" and "now" transitions (lines 6 and 9) that impose some order on events. For the most part, though, the poem is a collage of images and statements whose connections readers must infer for themselves.

Where Parataxis appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-5
- Lines 6-9
- Lines 11-20

VOCABULARY

Dwellings (Line 2) - Homes or residences.

Dialect (Lines 6-7) - A distinct, non-"standard" variant of a language, often spoken in a particular region or by a particular subculture.

Hate name (Lines 12-13) - A reference to some form of slur (whether racial, ethnic, religious, etc.).

Delicatessen (Lines 16-17) - A store that sells meats, cheeses, salads, sandwiches, and similar foods. Often shortened to "deli."

Inarticulate (Lines 17-18) - Unable to communicate clearly or effectively.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

The poem consists of four cinquains, a.k.a. five-line stanzas. These stanzas don't follow any particular meter or rhyme scheme; in other words, the poem is written in free verse, though it contains a few imperfect and slant rhymes (such as "years"/"hear" and "years"/"theirs" in the first stanza).

The poet might have chosen this form for a number of reasons. Poems arranged in cinquains are relatively rare in English poetry, at least compared to poems made of couplets, tercets, quatrains, etc. In that way, the poem's form gives it a slightly "foreign" quality, while still suggesting an attempt to bring the language into some kind of order. (Perhaps this attempt reflects the "foreign[er's]" effort to master their adopted country's language.)

Smoothly metrical, formally intricate verse wouldn't really feel true to this poem's scenario, which involves disorientation and struggles to communicate. But verse that was *completely* free, with no clear organization, wouldn't quite feel right, either. After all, the poem's "you" is constrained by their daily routine and their adopted country's prejudices. The consistent stanza length, fairly even line length, and occasional near-rhymes offer some sense of these constraining forces.

Interestingly, "Foreign" is 20 lines long and 20 is an important number in the poem: it's the number of years the imagined "you" has lived in their adopted country. This might be a coincidence, or it might be another subtle way of reflecting the character's experience in the poem's form.

METER

"Foreign" is a free verse poem, so it doesn't follow a meter. A smooth, steady rhythm would most likely have been a poor fit for this poem, which explores misunderstanding, violent communication (hate speech), and the difficulty of learning a language that's not "your" own.

However, wild, free-flowing lines would have been a strange choice, too, because "your" life is so governed by routine. (The poem's "you" has lived in the same place for decades.) Though the poem's lines aren't metrical, they are of roughly even length and grouped into orderly stanzas, suggesting that this "you" isn't entirely free.

RHYME SCHEME

As a free verse poem, "Foreign" doesn't have a rhyme scheme. However, it does throw in occasional slant or imperfect end rhymes: for example, in the first stanza, "years" (line 1) forms an imperfect rhyme with "hear" (line 3), as well as a slant rhyme with "theirs" (line 5). Also, "theirs" forms an internal rhyme with "stairs" in line 4, which ends the previous sentence.

Other examples (some more imperfect than others) include "you"/"know" (lines 8 and 9), "night"/"lights" (lines 11 and 14), "red"/"blood" (lines 12 and 13), and "Inarticulate"/"that" (lines 17 and 20).

While not enough to qualify "Foreign" as a full-fledged rhyming poem, these hints of rhyme do seem more than coincidental. Perhaps the poem's slippery, elusive approach to rhyme reflects the general slipperiness of language for the "you" of the poem. It's as if the poem's own language can't quite manage to be logical and orderly, but on some level, it's trying.

SPEAKER

The speaker of the poem isn't identified by any personal characteristics (name, age, gender, etc.); they may simply be a stand-in for the poet herself.

They're a voice of quiet urgency, asking readers to envision life as a struggling "foreigner." Or maybe they're not *asking* so much as *telling* or *urging*; they appeal to the reader directly throughout (using second-person pronouns, "you"/"your") and repeat the command "Imagine" four times. In between, the speaker guides "you" through experiences shared by many immigrants: living in meager conditions outside the social mainstream, struggling with a foreign language, etc. In this way, the speaker frames the whole poem as an exercise in imagination and empathy.

Occasionally, the speaker's voice loses its neutral tone, as when they describe the "dwellings" in line 2 as "dismal." The final command—"Imagine that"—could also be read as dryly ironic, implying that the scenario described in the poem isn't exactly far-fetched.

SETTING

The poem is set in a "strange, dark city" (line 1), where "you"—an immigrant or "foreigner"—have been living for two decades. This city contains "some dismal dwellings on the east side," one of which "is yours" (lines 2-3): a sign that you've struggled to make ends meet in your adopted country. Your neighbors seem to speak the primary language of this country ("You think / in a language of your own and talk in theirs," lines 4-5), so this probably isn't a neighborhood of people with backgrounds similar to yours.

The poem is careful not to tie the setting to a particular country or era. For example, the details of the urban environment ("public transport," "the neon lights," "the delicatessen") are generic and can be found in cities around the world. (The neon lights suggest that the poem is set in relatively modern times—early 20th century or after—but that doesn't narrow things down much.) The "hate name" sprayed on the wall (lines 12-13) isn't identified, so it could be virtually any slur in any language. The "home" country and "local dialect" in lines 6-7 aren't identified, either, so it's unclear what country "you" are from. In some sense, it doesn't matter: it was home and you miss it.

These generic details make the experiences described in the poem seem more universal and timeless. "Foreigners" everywhere, the poem suggests, encounter challenges much like these.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Carol Ann Duffy is among the most acclaimed and high-profile poets in the contemporary UK. Born in Scotland in 1955, she became the UK's first female poet laureate in 2009 and served in the position for the next 10 years. Like her successor in the role, Simon Armitage, she has gained a popular readership both in her own country and abroad. She is considered a leading literary chronicler of UK life; as poet laureate, she commemorated a number of UK news events in verse, from the unearthing and re-burial of King Richard III's remains ("Richard") to the wedding of Prince William and Catherine Middleton ("Rings").

"Foreign" appears in Duffy's second full-length poetry collection, *Selling Manhattan* (1987), which also includes the frequently anthologized "Warming Her Pearls." Many of her poems incorporate stories from the social and historical margins and include elements of social criticism. A lesbian writer in an often conservative, male-dominated literary culture, Duffy has blazed trails in her exploration of women's and LGBTQ narratives in contemporary UK poetry.

"Foreign" reflects her longtime interest in overlooked and sidelined communities. Without tying its scenario to a particular country or categorizing "you" as a particular identity group, the poem evokes the alienation and oppression of many immigrant communities around the world.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Though the poem isn't necessarily set in Duffy's native UK, her own country's politics in the previous two decades may have influenced her commentary on xenophobia.

In 1968, British Member of Parliament Enoch Powell had delivered his infamous "Rivers of Blood" speech, which sharply opposed mass immigration, especially from predominantly nonwhite countries that had formerly been colonized by the British Empire. The Immigration Act of 1971 had restricted immigration into the UK, and since 1979, the UK's Prime Minister had been the conservative Margaret Thatcher, who also opposed mass immigration. Notoriously, the year before her election, Thatcher had claimed that "people are really rather afraid that this country might be rather swamped by people with a different culture." Directly or indirectly, then, the poem's call to empathize with "Foreign" members of society might have been prompted by fear-driven UK immigration policy.

That said, "Foreign" goes out of its way to avoid supplying historical context. Rather than placing "you" in a clear historical (or contemporary) setting, the poem sketches a general scenario that arises in many places and periods, including our own.

This scenario includes xenophobia ("hate") toward immigrant populations, which not only keeps them down economically (confines them largely to "dismal" housing, etc.) but threatens to break out into civil violence ("blood"). Again, the generic setting suggests that this kind of prejudice can arise wherever large, diverse populations gather. At its worst, the poem suggests, it can cause whole societies to collapse into chaos ("com[e] to bits before your eyes"). And, of course, many real-life societies have descended into war and/or genocide due to racial, ethnic, and religious strife.

In this context, the word "delicatessen" (line 16) is a noteworthy detail, especially because it's a "foreign" loan word in a poem called "Foreign." Delicatessens originated in 18th-century Germany and became closely associated with European and American Jewish communities. Of course, they're not exclusively associated with these communities; they exist in many forms and locations around the world, so the deli in the poem isn't evidence of a particular setting. Still, the word may be meant to subtly invoke the history of 20th-century Germany, European anti-Semitism, and the Holocaust: an extreme example of prejudice causing mass bloodshed.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- An Interview with the Poet — Watch a 2009 interview with Carol Ann Duffy. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wnt5p1DGD9U)
- The Poet's Life and Work — A biography of Duffy at Poets.org. (https://poets.org/poet/carol-ann-duffy)
- The Poet as Laureate — Read about Duffy's appointment as the first female Poet Laureate in Britain's history. (https://www.nytimes.com/2009/05/02/world/europe/02poet.html?)
- Immigration in the UK — A brief timeline of immigration-related events in Duffy's native UK. (https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-51134644)
- Migrants and Discrimination in the UK — An overview of some of the discrimination experienced by migrants to the UK, compiled by the Migration Observatory at Oxford. (https://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/briefings/migrants-and-discrimination-in-the-uk/)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER CAROL ANN DUFFY POEMS

- A Child's Sleep
- Before You Were Mine
- Death of a Teacher
- Education For Leisure
- Head of English
- In Mrs Tilscher's Class
- Little Red Cap
- Medusa
- Mrs Midas
- Originally
- Prayer
- Stealing
- The Darling Letters
- Valentine
- Warming Her Pearls
- War Photographer
- We Remember Your Childhood Well

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