

Further Into the Past: (*In Newport...*, *Aubade with Burning City*)

"Milkflower petals in the street like pieces of a girl's dress."

Poems in part one of the collection are arranged in non-chronological order. In seeking to resurrect memories of his father, Ocean delves further into his family's past... and further and further back in time. *Aubade with Burning City* is an imaginative journey to a time before Ocean was born, returning him to an important site in his family history: Saigon. He uses poetic license to juxtapose two scenes: the encounter between a North Vietnamese soldier and an unknown woman in a hotel room, and the fall of Saigon in 1975, which he depicts in a series of graphic and surreal images. Connecting the two scenes are lyrics of the American song 'White Christmas' by Irving Berlin that was played over the radio as a code announcing the final evacuation of American personnel and civilians from the besieged city. *In Newport...* remembers an incident when Ocean's father ran to the aid of a dolphin that had become stranded on the beach. He intersperses the action of this incident with fragments of his father's experience during the war in Vietnam. At the end of the poem, he runs out of the car towards his father, drawn once again by the sound of his father's voice.

Knowledge Check

Try to answer these questions from memory:

1. What is an 'aubade'?

- (a) A poem about the sunrise
- (b) A technique in writing
- (c) A Vietnamese traditional song
- (d) A keyhole

2. In what year is *Aubade with Burning City* set?

- (a) 1972
- (b) 1975
- (c) 1977
- (d) 1979

3. What drink does the soldier try to give the girl in the hotel?

- (a) Tea
- (b) Coca-cola
- (c) Champagne
- (d) Ribena

4. What is run over by a tank in the street?

- (a) A black dog
- (b) A white rabbit
- (c) A yellow cat
- (d) A brown monkey

5. What is hurled through a store window?

- (a) A bicycle
- (b) A brick
- (c) A trash can
- (d) Shrapnel

6. What tattoo is inked on Ocean's father's arm?

- (a) Three phoenix
- (b) Three tear drops
- (c) Three torches
- (d) Three hearts

7. What is the make of car they are driving in *In Newport...*?

- (a) Ford
- (b) Toyota
- (c) Chevrolet
- (d) Nissan

8. Ocean remembers his father chasing his mother holding what?

- (a) A baseball bat
- (b) A chainsaw
- (c) A hammer
- (d) A bunch of flowers

9. Which of these words is NOT in the poem?

- (a) Tomahawk
- (b) Machine gun
- (c) Sniper
- (d) AK-47

10. The dolphin is described as a wet... what?

- (a) Refugee
- (b) Visitor
- (c) Outpatient
- (d) Satyr

Understanding and Interpretation

1. What do you learn about Ocean's father's past from the *In Newport* poem? How does this poem add to your understanding of him? How has the presentation of Ocean's father shifted or developed across part one of the poetry collection?
2. Skim *Aubade* to find moments of interaction between the soldier and Vietnamese girl. Do you find these moments tense or uncomfortable in any way? If so, what creates this feeling? What do you think is the reason Vuong interlaced the two scenes – one intimate and private, the other large-scale – in this poem?
3. How does Vuong craft a sense of danger, growing threat of violence, or approaching disaster in *Aubade*?
4. How do these poems suggest ideas of conflict, tension, (or reconciliation?) between Ocean's American identity and his Vietnamese family history?
5. How do the layouts or **shapes** (also called **spatial form**) of these two poems also relate to their ideas and themes?
6. What have you discovered through the collection's **non-chronological structure**? Why has Vuong organised his poems in this way? What is his purpose and what is the effect on the reader?

Poetry Study: *surreal imagery*

“Footsteps fill the square like stones falling from the sky”

The destruction of Saigon is easy to imagine. We hear the ‘*crackling*’ of snow as it piles up against the hotel windows. We picture the soldier standing outside the hotel and smell the smoke as he ‘*spits out his cigarette*’. We feel the texture of the girl’s white dress as we follow the soldier’s ‘*fingers running the hem*’ – and sense the danger and tension of this moment. We see the police chief lying face down on the paving stones and feel the stickiness of Coca-Cola pooling round his body. We feel tremors through the ground as tanks rumble and bombs fall. All of these **images** activate our wider perceptual senses and let us picture the scenes in a particular way.

This poem captures the strangeness and chaos that is the experience of a falling city. Several sensory experiences play out at the same time: a Christmas song plays over the radio; tanks crush paving stones; bombs explode; people are evacuated by helicopter; two other people drink champagne. The poem features ordinary people and places: a traffic policeman, a girl, a hotel room, Saigon city streets, a dress, flowers, a candle, Coca-Cola. However, the way these ordinary things are described is often surprising, **images** are combined in unpredictable ways, and the world takes on a **surreal**, dreamlike quality.

Therefore, a feature of the poem is Ocean’s use of imagery that is specific, but at the same time fantastical and **surreal**. For example, the epigraph tells us that it’s *South Vietnam, April 29, 1975* – but snow falls on the city throughout the poem. Snow, in April, in a tropical country? The snow falling on the city seems to refer to an unmentioned thing: ash or dust as the city falls. When different images collide in strange ways, they become something else. The footsteps of soldiers become stones falling from the sky. Milkflower petals transform into pieces of a girl’s torn dress and, later in the poem, the words of the White Christmas song become the girl’s dress falling to the floor. Each time, the surreality of the images is created by the **contrast** of different things coming together.

Surreal images like this are not literal, in fact, they are often impossible! But each contrast produces a moment of wonder and draws attention to questions of what is really happening in the scene.

Activity

Return to both *Aubade with Burning City* and *In Newport...* and find more examples of images that collide in surreal or fantastical ways. Discuss the elements of these **surreal images**. What meanings are created through these collisions?

Think about a way of transforming one or the other of these poems into a visual medium. For example, you could create a comic strip / graphic novel version of a poem, paint a picture, make a collage, or sketch. You could even imagine a movie poster based on a poem, or the whole collection! Alternatively, if you don’t like artistic tasks, you could make a mind-map or chart of the surreal images in the poems, with notes on the meanings they create, or even write a mini-essay in which you answer one of these prompts:

1. How does *Vuong* use surreal images to uncover truths about his father and/or family history in *In Newport...*?
2. How is surreal imagery used to reimagine the fall of Saigon in *Aubade with Burning City*?

Poetry Study: *alliteration and consonance*

“Open this when you need me the most he said as he slid the shoe box... beneath my bed.”

Accomplished poets like Ocean Vuong know that words stimulate through sound. Our ears react with the pleasure of listening to familiar or unfamiliar words arranged in new patterns. Little children love listening to the sound of parents reading, even if they are too young to understand the story. Sometimes people have been known to listen to poems in a language they cannot understand; the sentences sound real and arouse feelings regardless. In ways like this, poems can be understood on an emotional level. Just sounds and patterns of sound create imaginative connections and meanings.

Throughout *Night Sky with Exit Wounds*, Vuong strengthens the sonic aspects of his writing to create effects. Alliteration is one of the earliest formal features of English poetry. Repeating an initial consonant sound used to be called head-rhyme. Consonance differs from alliteration only in that it repeats sounds within words as well. In general, poets look to strengthen either hard consonants or soft consonants (and vowels, which is called assonance). There are 8 types of alliteration/consonance, each of which can be categorized as hard or soft. In general (although not always), hard consonant sounds are good at creating strong or negative effects whereas soft consonance and assonance is good at creating more subtle, or more harmonic effects. Consonance and assonance both contribute to the tone and mood of a poem and evoke emotions in the reader:

Soft Consonance and Assonance		Hard Consonance	
Sibilance: S, soft C, SH, Z, (CH)		Dental: D, T	
Nasal: M, N		Plosive: B, P	
Aspirant: H		Guttural: G, K, hard C, (X)	
Liquid: L, R, W			
		Fricative: F, TH, V, (J)	
Assonance: A, E, I, O, U, Y			

As well as contributing to a poem's tone and atmosphere, alliteration and consonance can be used to create **auditory imagery**. For example, in the opening couplet of *Always and Forever* Vuong writes: 'Open this when you need me the most he said as he slid the shoe box... beneath the bed.' This line contains **sibilant consonance** (*this, most, said, slid, shoe*) and **plosive alliteration** (*box, beneath, bed*). Initially, sibilance creates the auditory image of a tape-wrapped package sliding across a hard floor. Additionally, the traditional association of sibilance with the hissing of a snake comes into play. We are not meant to hear the sound of a snake literally; this poem has nothing to do with snakes! However, later in the poem the box is revealed to contain a gun; sibilance creates a sinister sense of hidden danger that foreshadows the reveal of the gun later in the poem. At the end of the line, plosive sounds are prominent. Again, not only do plosives create the auditory image of a heavy object being placed under the bed, but the hard, impactful sounds of plosive B foreshadow the contents of the box as being something associated with violence.



Return to the poems you have read and try to identify certain patterns of sound. Where do they occur strongly. Can you suggest effects based on the sound patterns you identify? Alliteration and consonance can also be used to create auditory images. Does this occur anywhere in these poems? Do the sound patterns shift? Are there any moments in the poem emphasized through sound? Spend some time with the poem and discuss this in pairs or threes to compare your thoughts and ideas.

Analytical Writing Practice

Once you have come to an understanding of **alliteration / consonance**, try to write an analytical paragraph commenting on the contribution of at least one incidence of sound to the images, ideas, or action of one of the poems you have studied.

Consider choosing one of the following ideas, or offer a moment of your own choosing that you think is embellished by sound:

1. How sound is used to evoke the mysteriousness and/or threat of his father's figure shrouded in water in *Threshold*.
2. How sound suggests Ocean's feelings as he searches for his father in *Telemachus*.
3. How sound heightens the ambiguous presentation of the father in *Always and Forever*.
4. How sound recreates the auditory dimension of PTSD in *In Newport...*
5. How sound contributes to the tender aspect of his father's handling of the dolphin in *In Newport...*
6. How sound builds a sense of approaching danger or disaster in *Aubade with Burning City*.
7. How sound evokes the chaos and devastation of a falling city in *Aubade with Burning City*.
8. How alliteration is used to highlight a particular moment in any of the poems you have read (e.g. as the helicopter 'lifts the living' in *Aubade*, or as the father slides the box under the bed in *Always and Forever*).