

Memories of Ba: (*Threshold, Telemachus, Always and Forever*)

"I pull my father out of the water, drag him by his hair..."

Threshold is positioned as a singular poem in the collection, a prologue or jumping off point. It describes a fragmentary memory from Ocean's childhood, kneeling outside the bathroom door while his father showered inside. The poem's most important image is of water clouding the outline image of his father, almost as if he's not really there. The only part of the memory that Ocean remembers clearly is the sound of his father's song; and it's this that will draw Ocean into the 'quest' to find his absent father.

The first poem in part one of the collection, *Telemachus* unfolds like a dream sequence of Ocean pulling a man's body from the sea. The man could be Ocean's father, but he has been shot in the back. When Ocean turns the body over, all he sees in the man's dark eyes is the image of a cathedral that burned to the ground years before Ocean was born. The poem ends with Ocean embarking on his own journey to find his absent father. Just like Telemachus from the ancient Greek story of Odysseus, he yet has far to go, and his chance of success is far from certain.

Knowledge Check

Try to answer these questions from memory:

1. Which is the closest in meaning to 'threshold'?

- (a) Doorway
- (b) Boundary
- (c) Ending
- (d) Keyhole

2. What description does Ocean give to the water striking his father?

- (a) Tracer shells
- (b) Anchor lines
- (c) Guitar strings
- (d) Brush strokes

3. What shape does his father's shadow take?

- (a) A colt
- (b) A lion
- (c) A tiger
- (d) A shark

4. What is the missing word: *Listen for my _____ breath...*

- (a) Taut
- (b) Clutched
- (c) Clasped
- (d) Snatched

5. In *Telemachus*, Ocean drags the body out of the water by his...

- (a) Arms
- (b) Ears
- (c) Hair
- (d) Legs

6. What happened to the city he came from?

- (a) Nothing
- (b) Buried in a landslide
- (c) Destroyed in an earthquake
- (d) Bombed in a war

7. What is the missing word: *the _____ work of drowning:*

- (a) Faithful
- (b) Hopeless
- (c) Painful
- (d) Inevitable

8. What is the shoe box Ocean's father leaves wrapped in?

- (a) Sellotape
- (b) Christmas paper
- (c) Duct tape
- (d) A red ribbon.

9. What feature does Ocean have above his brow?

- (a) A mole
- (b) Wrinkles
- (c) A birthmark
- (d) A scar

10. How many years pass before Ocean opens the shoe box?

- (a) Three
- (b) Seven
- (c) Ten
- (d) Fifteen

Understanding and Interpretation

1. How does Ocean Vuong remember his father in these poems? What images and/or symbols does he use to describe him? What does this imagery tell us about his father, or about their relationship?
2. These poems are semi-autobiographical, meaning they are inspired by the writer's life and experiences. What do we learn about Ocean himself from these poems?
3. How do these poems help to establish the 'narrative' of the poetry collection? Is a sense of story, progression, or development appearing?
4. Even to the poet's name (Ocean), water is an important motif across the collection. How is water used to suggest deeper meanings in these poems?
5. Touching, intimacy, and violence are closely linked in these poems. What creates this complex feeling? What words or images most strongly suggest the mixed intimacy and danger of touch?

Important Theme: *the father figure / masculinity*

“Or maybe just a man kneeling at a boy’s bed, his grey overalls reeking of gasoline...”

The collection’s early poems frame *Night Sky With Exit Wounds* as a book that’s going to be about the search for the writer’s father. An imposing and powerful figure in his early life, later Ocean’s father disappeared.

Telemachus alludes to the mythical story of the son who waited for his father to return from war, finally setting out to search for the lost father. A figure washes up on shore with ‘a face... not mine’, a man ‘so still he could be anyone’s father.’ Ocean discovers the man has been shot in the back, and he tries to revive him: this work will continue throughout many of the poems in part one, and after.

Ocean’s relationship with his father is complex. Connecting all three sections are poems about Ocean’s father, a character who looms large and casts a shadow over Ocean’s life and work. His father is a source of confusion and pain; he was violent towards Ocean’s mother and displays erratic and unpredictable behaviour. Nevertheless, Ocean needs to know more about his father and yearns for moments of connection with him. The ‘quest’ to be reunited with his father forms the narrative spine of the collection. In *Threshold*, Ocean recalls hearing his father singing in the shower, and tries to spy on him through the keyhole. He’s wants to see more of the man in this moment of private and vulnerable expression, a side of himself he normally hides. In *Telemachus*, Ocean imagines his father dead after being shot in the back fleeing a burning city. He takes it upon himself to try to revive the man, but knows that this might not be in his own best interest. This sums up Ocean’s complicated feelings towards his father that will develop over the course of part one.

In a way, the complex figure of Ocean’s father represents an idea of masculinity by which vulnerability is hidden under a tough, brutish exterior. The key symbol of his father’s type of masculinity is the gun. In the poem *The Smallest Measure* (from part three) Ocean’s father instructs him in how to hold a Winchester Rifle. In *Always and Forever*, the father’s parting gift is a Colt .45, which he gives to Ocean as a substitute for himself: ‘Open this when you need me the most’, he tells the young boy. Ocean wonders what the gun might signify and imagines using it to blow holes in the sky, suggesting the son might inherit the father’s type of masculinity. In Parts Two and Three of the collection, in poems such as *To My Father/To My Future Son*, Ocean will explicitly compare his father’s masculinity to his own and consider an alternative masculinity, an alternative way of being ‘a man’, for himself. For example, he will explore what it means for him to be a young, gay man in Part Two.

Activity

Create a portrait of Ocean’s father as presented in the poems from Part One (and elsewhere if you can) of *Night Sky With Exit Wounds*. This portrait can take any form you like: a mini-essay, a character profile, a mind-map, a collage, a picture with annotations, another idea you might come up with. Include words, images, descriptions, and symbols from the poems that reflect both his tender vulnerability and also the violence that simmers below the surface, occasionally exploding into action. Display your understanding of the type of masculinity that Ocean’s father represents.

Poetry Study: *enjambment and dropped lines*

"I was alive. I didn't know

there was a better reason."

Vuong is a **free verse** poet, a form popular amongst American (and other) poets in the 20th and 21st centuries. Free verse provides an almost unlimited number of ways for writers to work as it does not have a set rhyme scheme or meter. Unlike metered poems, free verse poems do not have a syllable count per line. Syllables measure how long a word takes to say and what parts of a word are stressed (accented); by writing in free verse, Vuong implies that lines should be spoken naturally, and emphasis should fall where natural patterns of speech indicate. The form allows emotion to guide the reading of each poem and, on a thematic level, creates a sense of defiance against structures that can be related to the individual resisting society, or other forms of restriction.

That's not to say that free verse poems have no underlying logic or structure. A free verse poet simply uses other devices (rather than rhythm and rhyme scheme) to create patterns in each poem. For example, *Threshold* is written in short verses of two lines each (called **couplets**). Furthermore, in both *Threshold* and *Telemachus*, Vuong employs **enjambment**, created when he runs a sentence across two or more lines. Enjambment is intrinsically connected to the idea of movement. It creates a sense of flow, whether physical flow or the flow of time. For example, *Threshold*'s second and third verses describe a scene of Ocean's father in the shower, crafting an image of falling water outlining his shape. Enjambment in these lines easily conveys the flow of falling water, which Vuong describes like '*guitar strings*', '*rain*' and, later, calls a '*downpour*.' Additionally, *Threshold* recounts a memory, and enjambment serves to evoke the way a memory might oscillate and move in the mind. Finally, enjambment creates a sense of 'pull' as our eyes move more easily down the page when reading. As the first poem of the collection, *Threshold* exerts its own sense of force on a reader who is 'pulled' into Vuong's journey as he transports himself through the keyhole and back in time in search of his father.

Connected to his use of enjambment is a visual technique called **dropped lines**. This occurs when Vuong places an initial line in the regular place on the left of the page, but the following line is offset or indented. The result creates a gap (or **caesura**) within the verse. For example, the first verse of *Threshold* looks like this:

In the body, where everything has a price,
I was a beggar. On my knees,

Vuong continues this pattern through the rest of the poem. Dropped lines create a range of ideas, often linked to the action of the poem in which they appear. In this case, the lines evoke the sense of distance between Ocean and his father. Separated by the bathroom door, Vuong's vision is restricted by the keyhole through which he strains to see. There is also a distance in time between 'now' and the action of the poem, which is a fragmented memory from Vuong's childhood. Specifically, in verse three the dropped line visually resembles the '*broken guitar strings*' that Vuong uses as an image of water impacting and rebounding from his father's body.

Analytical Writing Practice

Write an analytical paragraph about the use of **enjambment**, **caesura**, and/or **dropped lines** in a poem you have read so far, or any other in the collection. Use (a) specific moment(s) to support your ideas about the effect of this technique in the collection.