

Memories of Ma: (*Immigrant Haibun, The Gift*)

"I see it: the strand of hair lifting from her face... how it fell onto the page –"

Immigrant Haibun is a prose poem followed by a haiku describing Ocean's mother as she leaves behind a burning city and crosses the sea, together with her husband. The story is told in the voice of Ocean's mother as she travels to America for the first time. As they cross, the calm sea becomes wilder and the waves become higher, trapping the boat inside a glass bottle. Flashing forward in time, we see glimpses of Ocean's family in America – before his father smashes the ship-in-a-bottle with a baseball bat.

In *The Gift*, a rare poem that focuses solely on Ocean's relationship with his mother, Ocean recounts a childhood memory of his mother, after long days working at a nail salon, coming home and teaching him to read and write. She only knows *a b c* – so this is what she gives him, over and over again until he's memorised the letters perfectly. The poem paints a loving portrait that contrasts with the violent tension of the father and fleshes out her character more fully.

Knowledge Check

Try to answer these questions from memory:

1. In *Immigrant Haibun*, what does his father burn to keep his mother warm?

- (a) His books
- (b) His shirt
- (c) His violin
- (d) The lifeboat

2. What flowers does Ocean's mother remember from the embassy before setting off for America?

- (a) Milkflowers
- (b) Hyacinths
- (c) Roses
- (d) Begonias

3. What weapon lies close to Ocean's father?

- (a) Machete
- (b) Bowie knife
- (c) Nunchucks
- (d) Axe

4. *There's a ship made from _____ and superglue:*

- (a) Matchsticks
- (b) Sawdust
- (c) Toothpicks
- (d) Cottonbuds

5. The three-line poem that ends *Immigrant Haibun* is a type of what?

- (a) Sestina
- (b) Villanelle
- (c) Triplet
- (d) Haiku

6. How many times is *a b c* repeated in *The Gift*?

- (a) Four
- (b) Six
- (c) Eight
- (d) Ten

7. Which of these is NOT something Ocean can smell on his mother?

- (a) Isopropyl acetate
- (b) Chloroform
- (c) Ethyl acetate
- (d) Sweat

8. What colour t-shirt is Ocean's mother wearing?

- (a) Pink
- (b) Green
- (c) Yellow
- (d) Turquoise

9. What letter is Ocean writing when his pencil snaps?

- (a) A
- (b) B
- (c) C
- (d) D

10. How does Ocean describe the broken pencil?

- (a) Yellow carcass
- (b) Yellow tunnel
- (c) Yellow gun-barrel
- (d) Yellow stem

Understanding and Interpretation

1. How does the image of a boat on the ocean develop over the course of this poem? What happens to this image? How does it change?
2. Ocean's mother portrays Ocean's father in a nuanced way. What contrasting impressions of him do you get from *Immigrant Haibun*?
3. In the final prose section of *Immigrant Haibun* (beginning '*If you must know anything...*'), Ocean imagines his mother speaking directly to him. What kinds of things does she tell him? What advice does she give?
4. What is the importance of *a b c* in *The Gift*? Why is it repeated so much? What happens in the last repetition, and why?
5. What impression of Ocean's mother do you get from the poems in this section? How is that impression formed?

Important Character: *Ocean's Mother*

"Sometimes I feel like an ampersand. I wake up waiting for the crush."

While *Night Sky With Exit Wounds* is, in large part, a book about the writer's attempt to explore and understand memories of his father, nevertheless Ocean's mother plays an important supporting role. By contrast with the father's abandonment of his son, Ocean's mother is a constant by his side. He emphasizes her influence on him and shares moments of intimacy between them. For example, in *The Gift*, Ocean puts his success as a writer down to her guidance. Even though she barely knew any English, she taught him to read and write his first letters. When the poem shifts register, using advanced scientific vocabulary, the reader can see how far Ocean has come in his mastery of language, a journey that began by his mother's side. The breaking of the pencil symbolizes the difficulty Ocean himself had with reading and writing, hinting at moments where he may have wanted to give up. However, his mother gently slides the pencil back into his hand and tells him to keep going.

The poetry collection is scattered with images of Ocean's mother and recollections of advice she gave him. In one of the last poems, Ocean writes: *'The most beautiful part of your body is wherever your mother's shadow falls'*. This image is telling: he feels his best qualities are ones that have been touched by his mother. The continued presence of her 'shadow' suggests Vuong's seeking of an alternative to the inadequate guidance provided by his father. Read alongside *Always and Forever*, the reader is encouraged to juxtapose the gifts his parents choose to give him: his father leaves a gun; his mother gives him the gift of language. In many ways she is the archetypal mother figure, carrying the classic maternal symbolism of love, nurture, comfort, and wisdom. She puts her child first, even when threatened with hardships and violence herself.

Quotation Hunt

Skim and scan the poetry collection, beginning with these poems and ranging further ahead, looking for moments where Ocean's mother is described or where she gives him advice. How does his mother help him come to terms with some of the questions Ocean is seeking to answer across the collection?

<i>'The best way to understand a man is with your teeth'</i> (Immigrant Haibun)	