

Living Space



SUMMARY

Nothing lines up—that's what's wrong here. Surfaces aren't flat and angles don't match. Ceiling beams are balanced precariously on their supports. Exposed nails hold parts of the house together. The structure is dangerous and could collapse, but it's also miraculous. Somebody has managed to make a home in this rough place. They've even been brave enough to hang eggs in a wire basket. Their delicate white shells are also balanced precariously, as if eggs were planets dangling over darkness that marks the edge of the universe. They seem to attract the light towards them, and their mere existence speaks of the power—and fragility—of faith.



THEMES



HUMAN RESOURCEFULNESS AND FRAGILITY

"Living Space" is a poem about creating a place to live with few resources. Said by Dharker herself to describe the slums of Mumbai, India, the poem is a snapshot of a home that doesn't have straight lines, solid walls, or secure ceilings. Instead, this "structure leans dangerously," indicating its fragility—but it leans "towards the miraculous" too. "Living Space," then, is really about the remarkable ability of humanity to make homes in all sorts of places and conditions—and to fill these homes with life.

On a technical level, there is a lot wrong with the dwelling described in the poem. This place doesn't have "straight lines" or "flat" surfaces. Instead, it is a "rough frame" into which "someone has squeezed / a living space." This home isn't particularly safe either. Ceiling beams are balanced precariously, and nails protrude from the walls. The point, though, is not to criticize the construction, but to praise the fact that it exists at all. This home is somewhat improvised, put together by someone without much building expertise—but with plenty of grit and determination. This testifies to the resourcefulness of humanity to set up a home pretty much wherever it goes.

Thus while on the surface this is a dangerous living situation, there's also something "miraculous" about it. Indeed, running through the poem is a sense that *all* life is fragile, and that its existence in any shape or form is a kind of miracle. Despite having very little to their name, the occupant of this house makes a life for themselves—and this is something to be celebrated, suggests the poem. (There could also be multiple occupants—the poem doesn't say.)

The resourcefulness of the person who lives in this space is then symbolized by the "eggs in a wire basket." These, too, represent life and are, of course, extremely fragile. Like the house itself, it wouldn't take much to break these eggs. But they *aren't* broken, and instead are waiting there to be used in cooking, to become part of the occupant's everyday existence.

Focusing on the image of the eggs, the poem then widens its metaphorical perspective. Suddenly, the poem is no longer just talking about this one particular dwelling, or even the Mumbai slums in general—this is about the *entirety* of humanity. Crowded onto planet Earth, the human population itself is "hung out over the dark edge / of a slanted universe." For all its technological advancement, complexity of thought, and instinctive resourcefulness, humanity too is like a bunch of eggs suspended in a precarious situation. For instance, an asteroid might hit the earth, or humanity might destroy itself through war. *All* life, then, is perched on a structure both dangerous and miraculous.

That's why the poem ends with a mention of faith. Behind human resourcefulness is a kind of belief in the value and worth of life—that, the poem indicates, is why this person has put so much effort into making a home, even if they don't have the resources to build it in a more structurally sound way. This is a kind of faith in everyday existence, that life has meaning and is worth working for. But, as with the living space and the eggs, this faith too is fragile, protected only by "bright, thin walls."

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-22



LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-5

*There are just ...
... or parallel.*

The poem's title signals that what follows will be about some kind of home. Dharker herself has said that she had the slums of Mumbai, India in mind when she wrote this poem—but that location isn't specifically referenced in the poem, nor is it necessary for making sense of the poem's setting and broader significance.

The first thing to notice about the poem is its slenderness. Most of the lines are very short, making the poem appear thin on the page. Even before the poem starts, then, there is a suggestion both of construction (the poem itself) and fragility (the thin, almost wispy block of text).

In the poem's opening lines, the speaker launches into a kind of survey of the building in question. The speaker evaluates the dwelling's appearance, implicitly comparing it with a more typically constructed house. Whereas houses *usually* (and, of course, it's important to remember that this is a generalization) are designed with "straight lines," "parallel" angles, and "flat" surfaces, this building is missing all of those stabilizing features. The speaker is not being critical, necessarily, but rather seems to be making a set of observations that informs the reader of the structure's precariousness—it *shouldn't* stand strong, yet it does.

[Enjambment](#) and [caesura](#) are key techniques that the poem uses to convey this precariousness throughout. The line-break after "enough" in line 1 makes the meaning of the line incomplete until line 2, which then has an intentionally awkward caesura after the word "lines." This means that "That" in line 2 becomes a fragment, which is then completed by line 3 ("is the problem"). The haphazard way that the sentences unfold mimics the improvised method with which the living space has been put together.

At the same time, the sentences *do* make sense—that is, the grammar itself isn't fragmented or disrupted. So the poem is also suggesting structural soundness because, after all, the home *is* a functional living space—it works. This underlying coherence is also hinted at by the [assonance](#) in "flat" and "parallel," the vowel sounds hanging together like the dwelling itself. The same is true of the "that"/"flat" [rhyme](#) across lines 2 and 4, and the /t/ [consonance](#) that runs throughout these opening lines: "just," "not," "straight," "That," "flat."

LINES 5-8

*Beams ...
... at open seams.*

Whereas the poem's first three sentences were generally abstract, painting a general picture of the "living space," line 5 (after the [caesura](#) between "parallel" and "Beams") up to line 8 ("Nails clutch at open seams.") adds more concrete detail. Ceiling "beams" are balanced awkwardly on supports "thrust off the vertical"—"thrust" is an interesting verb, indicating how this is a somewhat hurried construction, made more through willpower than architectural know-how. The [alliteration](#) and [consonance](#) in "beams" and "balance" cleverly represent this balancing act itself: each word has a /b/ sound at the start, and a [sibilant](#) sound (/s/ or /c/ here) at the end, performing in a sound a miniature version of what is being described.

There are also hard /k/ sounds running throughout these lines: "crookedly," "vertical," "clutch." This consonance is spread across the lines. Consonance is a kind of poetic design or structure, so the distance between these sounds—which nevertheless chime together—represents the way that the "living space" looks like it could fall apart at any moment (but doesn't).

Line 8 ("Nails clutch at open seams") heightens the sense of danger that the structure seems to pose (anticipating line 9, where the reader learns that it "leans dangerously"). Nails—which are sharp objects, of course—seem threatening, exposed rather than concealed. The "open seams" also suggest this sense of threat, hinting that this home is exposed to the outside world (e.g., bad weather that might come along and threaten to collapse the dwelling).

LINES 9-10

*The whole structure ...
... towards the miraculous.*

Lines 9 and 10 ("The whole structure" through "the miraculous") are arguably the most important shift of the poem. They represent the point at which the poem turns in a new direction: lines 1-8 describe the "living space" in a literal way, but they (intentionally) don't say much about what the living space *means*.

From here on in, the poem introduces the idea of the "miraculous" and broadens its scope far beyond the initial focus on one particular dwelling in Mumbai. At first, line 9 appears to merely confirm what's already been established, that "The whole structure" is precarious and at risk of collapsing. In other words, the dwelling is dangerous. This is the longest line in the poem, intentionally testing the structural integrity of the poem's shape by pushing it to its limit. The [enjambment](#) leaves the line hanging in the air, laid bare on the page just as the living space itself is exposed to the elements.

But it's also this enjambment that allows for the poem's shift in direction, with line 10 ("towards the miraculous") completely changing the meaning of line 9. Line 10 transforms the poem from a dry look at a precariously built home into an exploration of what the home's existence represents. The "structure" *does* "lean[] dangerously" in a literal sense, but in a more figurative sense it leans "towards the miraculous." That is, its existence is proof of a kind of miracle.

Of course, it's up to the reader to consider what "miraculous" might mean here. But considering what follows, it seems as though the poem is saying that life itself is miraculous—the way it exists in all kinds of places, under all types of stress. The very existence of the structure suggests that life is something to be valued, no matter how fragile it may be.

Furthermore, perhaps the fragility of the structure makes it somehow *more* representative of the "miraculous" in life, because it literally and figuratively stands for a kind of victory over difficult circumstances (whereas a more stable home might be taken for granted). The poem, then, switches from *seeming* to critique the structure to praising it and what it represents. [Consonant](#) /l/ sounds occur through these two lines (and line 8), almost unbalancing the sound of the poem. They seem to stretch this section, as if trying to pull it apart, together with long /e/ [assonance](#):

The whole structure leans dangerously towards the miraculous.

As with elsewhere in the poem, the sounds of the words simultaneously prod at the structure, testing it for weakness, while also reflecting its deliberate construction. That is, the poet's intentional use of [alliteration](#), consonance, and assonance mimics the intention behind the building of the "living space" itself.

LINES 11-16

*Into this rough ...
... curves of white*

Lines 11 through 16 ("Into this rough frame ... curves of white") reveal that like a frame for a photograph, this "rough frame" (the dwelling) is filled with a picture of life. Though the person (or perhaps people; the poem doesn't specify) who built the living space isn't in the poem per se, their presence is still felt both in the structure itself and the image of the eggs. This person is described as "dar[ing]," indicating the speaker's admiration for them. This admiration is based on this "someone's" determination to create a place to live, despite having few resources.

The smallness of the space is portrayed through the long /ee/ sound of "squeezed," with the [alliteration](#) and [consonance](#) in the same line packing a lot of similar sounds into one small compartment—"someone has squeezed"—just like the person who lives here has to do. That is, they "squeeze" their life into a small physical space, just as the poem squeezes several similar sounds into a small number of syllables. [Assonance](#) binds words like "frame," "space," and "place" together, showing how closely related these words are as concepts. This connection speaks to human resourcefulness, namely the ability to create "space" in almost any "place"—and, indeed, to make a "place" (a home) out of any available "space"—which in turn acts as a "frame" around people's lives.

The eggs are the key symbol of the poem. They indicate fragility (as stated in line 16, with "fragile curves"), reminding the reader of the precariousness of this particular dwelling place and, indeed, of life itself. The eggs also represent life, both in the sense that they might hatch new chickens *and* in the sense that they can provide nourishment—an essential part of being alive. And perhaps most importantly, just as the dwelling as a whole leans "towards the miraculous," the eggs, with their easily broken shells, also speak to the miracle of life itself—something that exists seemingly against the odds.

LINES 17-22

*hung out over ...
... walls of faith.*

The last six lines widen the poem's perspective. Apart from line 10 ("towards the miraculous."), the poem so far has been quite

concrete and down-to-earth. Still focusing on the symbol of the eggs, the poem considers how they seem to speak to the fragility of *all* life. Line 17 ("hung out over the dark edge") uses enjambment similarly to the previous line, suggesting a kind of "edge" by allowing the text to reach into the empty space of the page without punctuation. This makes the words feel precariously balanced, just like the eggs themselves.

The eggs are like a microcosm for the dwelling, representing its fragility in miniature. But the mention of "a slanted universe" helps the poem zoom out from the eggs to show how this makeshift dwelling is *also* like a miniature version of the earth itself. That is, humanity (and other life forms) is perched on a kind of edge, existing—and surviving—against the odds, with no guarantee that it will always continue to be so. For all its technology and civilization, humanity remains prone to destruction. An asteroid might hit, natural disaster might strike, or war might ravage the earth—eventually, the sun will certainly die. So the existence of any life is a kind of miracle, something which the poem implicitly argues is worth valuing despite (or because of) its fragility.

Delicate /th/ [consonance](#) throughout these lines has a soft quality that emphasizes the poem's focus on the fragility of life:

hung out over **the** dark edge
of a slanted universe,
gathering **the** light
into **themselves**,
as if **they** were
the bright, **thin** walls of faith.

The way the eggs "gather[] the light" represents the determination of life to continue—life will exist for as long as it can. Furthermore, life depends on the sun—the source of the earth's light—and this light is literally absorbed into the life forms that exist on the planet. "Light" here rhymes with the earlier "white," and also chimes with the "bright" in the last line. These full rhymes brighten up the sound of the poem, supporting and highlighting the closing image.

The poem closes on a [simile](#), comparing the egg shells to "the bright, thin walls of faith." This phrase mixes a concrete image ("walls") with an abstract concept ("faith"). "Faith" links with the idea put forward in line 10 that life is inherently "miraculous." This faith doesn't necessarily have to be religious in nature, but could speak instead to a fundamental belief in the value of life and being alive (which is what drove the poem's "someone" to construct this dwelling the first place). This is a kind of faith in mere existence, a belief that life has meaning and purpose and is worth pursuing. Like the shells of the eggs and the walls of the "living space," this faith, too, is "fragile" and "miraculous."



SYMBOLS



THE EGGS

The eggs are the centerpiece of "Living Space," working both as a symbol in their own right and allowing the poem to widen its perspective. On a literal level, the eggs are a sign of life—that is, they show that "someone" actively lives in this living space. The eggs are part of the daily existence of this "someone," suspended in the basket so that they can be eaten later. In this sense, then, the eggs represent nourishment and sustenance, the ongoing determination to live life. And because eggs sometimes hatch new life, they often represent cycles of life more generally, so that broader sense of life's persistent continuation is present here as well.

But the poem also borrows another characteristic from the eggs in order to broaden its discussion. Dharker herself has described this poem as an "image of fragility," and the eggs are part of this. The delicateness of their shells is a mirror for the precariousness of the dwelling in which the eggs are stored. As the poem widens out to discuss the "universe" and "faith," this central image of fragility also speaks to the way that human beings are, ultimately, in a similar situation. That is, the existence of life on earth is itself a miraculous improbability that stands as testament to life's ability to adapt and survive. Note also how the whiteness of the egg shells contrasts with the foreboding "dark edge" of the "slanted universe," further suggesting just how miraculous and tenuous the existence of life is within a broadly inhospitable world.

But for all humankind's technological advancement and civilized development, it's still a precarious existence—human civilization could end at any time, just as the eggs could break, so the poem argues that that's all the more reason to value it in the meantime.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 14-22:** "and even dared to place / these eggs in a wire basket, / fragile curves of white / hung out over the dark edge / of a slanted universe, / gathering the light / into themselves, / as if they were / the bright, thin walls of faith."



POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

[Alliteration](#) is used throughout "Living Space." As with [assonance](#) and [consonance](#), its main purpose here is to suggest a haphazard kind of design and construction that is nonetheless effective. Using sonic devices like alliteration is the poem's way of mirroring both the improvised nature of the "living space" in

question and its precariousness—the way it seems to be at risk of collapse, yet somehow stays standing. So alliteration is achieving two seemingly contradictory aims, suggesting both strength *and* weakness in terms of the poem's—and the living space's—construction.

An early significant example of alliteration occurs across the [enjambment](#) between lines 5 and 6:

or parallel. Beams
balance crookedly on supports

The sound of this alliteration is strong, but it's isolated, suggesting its own strange mix of strength and precariousness. Broken across two lines, it also mirrors the "crooked[ness]" with which the ceiling beams are balanced in the living space. That is, the beams *should* be at the same height, but they're not. Likewise, the two /b/s, which belong together, are placed on two different levels, with the second lower on the page. "Crookedly" and "clutch" also alliterate, but are further apart—the sounds ring out together, but they are placed differently from the two /b/s. This suggests inconsistency: the dwelling's lack of "straight lines" or "parallel" angles.

Lines 12 and 13 use alliteration a little differently:

someone has squeezed
a living space

Here, /s/ consonants begin three out of the lines' six words. This literally squeezes a single sound repeatedly into a small space, neatly portraying the way that "someone" lives in this tiny, improvised structure.

The other key example of alliteration occurs throughout the last six lines. Often, sounds distributed among this many lines wouldn't necessarily ring out together, but these lines are so short that they do. A gentle, wispy /th/ sound features throughout:

hung out over the dark edge
...
gathering the light
into themselves,
as if they were
the bright, thin walls ...

This sound effectively communicates the thinness of the eggs' shells, the precariousness of the "living space," and the "miraculous" existence of life itself—in other words, the sound works hard to support the poem's meaning!

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Th"

- **Line 2:** "Th"
- **Line 3:** "th"
- **Line 5:** "B"
- **Line 6:** "b," "c"
- **Line 8:** "c"
- **Line 12:** "s," "s"
- **Line 13:** "s"
- **Line 17:** "th"
- **Line 19:** "th"
- **Line 20:** "th"
- **Line 21:** "th"
- **Line 22:** "th"

ASSONANCE

[Assonance](#) is used throughout "Living Space." As with [alliteration](#) and [consonance](#), assonance works to underscore the haphazard nature of the dwelling being described—while also hinting at its underlying strength.

One of the first examples of assonance is in lines 4 and 5: "flat" and "parallel" (also chiming with "That" from line 2). Vowels here are like building materials—wooden beams, plaster, and so on—that strengthen in sound the closer together and more numerous they are. But these /a/ sounds feel almost randomly placed, reflecting the improvised construction of this "living space"—there is no grand design, just whatever works.

The poem develops this idea further using /u/ and /ee/ sounds in lines 6 through 10:

... crookedly on supports
thrust off ...
Nails clutch at open seams.
The whole structure leans dangerously
... miraculous.
Into this rough ...

The repeated vowel sounds are like supports running through these lines, as if to hold other words in place.

Next up is the /a/ sound that rings out between "frame," "space," and "place." This links these three words together conceptually. Human beings find "space," and turn it into a "place" (a home). This then becomes the "frame" of their lives, the structure within which they spend much of their time.

A similar effect is achieved by "white," "light," and "bright" later in the poem. Though spread out over numerous lines, these words clearly link together through their shared vowels. These words—also sharing /t/ consonance—are full, bright-sounding rhymes that develop the ending's focus on light. They help the poem end on a positive note, with the speaker implicitly praising life—and its continued survival—as a kind of miracle.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "u," "ou"
- **Line 2:** "a"
- **Line 4:** "a"
- **Line 5:** "a," "a," "ea"
- **Line 6:** "y," "u"
- **Line 7:** "u"
- **Line 8:** "u," "ea"
- **Line 9:** "u," "ea," "ou," "y"
- **Line 10:** "ou"
- **Line 11:** "ou," "a"
- **Line 12:** "o," "o"
- **Line 13:** "a"
- **Line 14:** "a"
- **Line 16:** "i"
- **Line 19:** "i"
- **Line 22:** "i"

CAESURA

There are just three [caesurae](#) in "Living Space." The first comes in the second line. Working with the [enjambment](#) between lines 1 and 2, this caesura makes the poem open (intentionally) awkwardly:

There are just not enough
straight lines. That
is the problem.

The caesura looks like it's placed at random, fragmenting the line. This prevents the poem from being neat and ordered, and better conveys the haphazard, improvised method with which the "living space" has been constructed. Indeed, it stops the poem from unfolding in "straight lines," mirroring the "problem" of the living space by making the poem stumble as it unfolds.

Indeed, line 5's caesura does exactly the same thing:

Nothing is flat
or parallel. Beams
balance crookedly on supports

Again, the effect is awkward, deliberately preventing the poem from establishing any kind of easy flow. The effect is doubled because visually, the caesura here doesn't quite line up vertically with the caesura in line 2—they're nearly "parallel," placed at similar points in their respective lines, but they don't quite match up.

The other caesura is in the last line, but it has a different effect:

the bright, thin walls of faith.

This caesura slows down the pace of the line and encourages

the reader to pause and experience some of the same wonder that the speaker seems to feel upon contemplating the miraculousness of life.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "lines. That"
- **Line 5:** "parallel. Beams"
- **Line 22:** "bright, thin"

CONSONANCE

[Consonance](#) is used throughout "Living Space." As with [assonance](#) and [alliteration](#), the poem mostly uses consonance to mirror the improvised nature of the "living space," while also emphasizing that it nonetheless stays standing.

One particularly significant instance of consonance is the use of /t/ sounds throughout the first half of the poem:

There are just not enough
straight lines. That
...
Nothing is flat
... supports
thrust off the vertical.
Nails clutch at open seams.
The whole structure ...
towards the ...

The hard /t/ consonant is one that features prominently in nearly all of these lines. To make it out loud requires what is known as an alveolar stop—when the mouth has to stop airflow from the lungs to create the required sound. This, then, helps the sound stick out among the others. Metaphorically speaking, the angular-sounding /t/ represents the "rough" way in which the living space has been put together, with beams almost off balance and nails sticking out of the wall (like /t/ consonants stick out of a word!). At the same time, /s/ sounds across the same lines and alliterative /th/ sounds lend a sense of stability, subtly indicating that even though the "living space" is "rough," it's also essentially sturdy; after all, it's still standing.

Lines 9 and 10 feature soft /l/ consonance:

The whole structure leans dangerously
towards the miraculous.

These /l/ sounds stretch throughout the two lines, representing the precariousness of the living space structure. It's a delicate sound, and almost feels as if it's under threat from the harsher /t/ and /s/ consonants.

The /th/ sound in the last few lines ("hung out" through "thin walls of faith") is mostly alliteration, but there is some internal consonance too. These have an incredibly delicate, feather-

light kind of sound in words like "gathering" and "faith." This helps the poem build a picture of fragility, not just of the eggs, but of the dwelling and, even more broadly, life itself.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Th," "st"
- **Line 2:** "st," "t," "s," "Th," "t"
- **Line 3:** "s," "th"
- **Line 4:** "th," "s," "t"
- **Line 5:** "ll," "l," "B," "s"
- **Line 6:** "b," "c," "c," "k," "s," "ts"
- **Line 7:** "th," "st," "th," "t," "c"
- **Line 8:** "l," "s," "cl," "t," "s," "s"
- **Line 9:** "l," "st," "l," "s," "sl"
- **Line 10:** "t," "s," "l," "s"
- **Line 11:** "gh," "f"
- **Line 12:** "s," "s," "s," "z"
- **Line 13:** "s," "c"
- **Line 14:** "d," "d," "c"
- **Line 15:** "s," "s," "s"
- **Line 16:** "c"
- **Line 17:** "th," "k"
- **Line 18:** "s," "n," "n," "s"
- **Line 19:** "th," "th"
- **Line 20:** "th"
- **Line 21:** "th"
- **Line 22:** "th," "th," "th"

ENJAMBMENT

[Enjambment](#) is used frequently throughout "Living Space." In the whole poem, only one line is written as a complete sentence (line 8, "Nails clutch at open seams"). Everywhere else, grammatical phrases are stretched across at least two lines.

In the beginning, enjambment is used to make the poem intentionally awkward, with its own (deliberately) haphazard construction reflecting the way that the "living space" being discussed is an improvised—and precarious—dwelling. Enjambment makes the first four sentences into fragments, as if they are close to collapse:

... not enough
straight lines. That
is the problem.
Nothing is flat
or parallel. Beams
balance crookedly on supports
thrust off ...

Enjambment is also a key part of the most significant shift in the entire poem. Whereas lines 1 through 8 (the beginning through "open seams") describe the "living space" in a fairly matter-of-fact way—and the sentence started in line 9 *seems* to continue

this trend—the enjambment at the end of line 9 allows for a startling and surprising change of direction in line 10. Suddenly, the focus is not on concrete details, but rather on something more abstract and, ultimately, positive:

The whole structure leans **dangerously**
towards the miraculous.

Line 9, the longest line in the poem, literally leans out into the white space of the page. But though the living space *does* lean "dangerously" in a similarly literal sense, the speaker also flips this idea on its head, stating that it actually leans "towards the miraculous." In other words, the living space is proof of some kind of miracle, perhaps of the wonder and value—and near-impossibility—of life itself.

Lines 16 and 17 are both focused on edges—the eggs' shells ("fragile curves of white") and the "edge / of a slanted universe," respectively. Using enjambment here means that these images of edges are also edges themselves, of poetic lines. These enjambments support the idea that is subtly put forth at the end of the poem: the fragility of human life on planet earth, and the way that we too live on a kind of edge within the darkness of the universe.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "enough"
- **Line 2:** "straight," "That"
- **Line 3:** "is"
- **Line 4:** "flat"
- **Line 5:** "or," "Beams"
- **Line 6:** "balance," "supports"
- **Line 7:** "thrust"
- **Line 9:** "dangerously"
- **Line 10:** "towards"
- **Line 12:** "squeezed"
- **Line 13:** "a"
- **Line 14:** "place"
- **Line 15:** "these"
- **Line 16:** "white"
- **Line 17:** "hung," "edge"
- **Line 18:** "of"
- **Line 19:** "light"
- **Line 20:** "into"
- **Line 21:** "were"
- **Line 22:** "the"

SIMILE

The poem uses one [simile](#), which occurs in the last two lines. Just before this simile, the eggs are developed symbolically as a way of speaking about the fragility both of this particular dwelling—and the specific life of the "someone" who lives there—and of human existence more generally. Considering the

way that the light in the room interacts with the egg shells, the poem compares them to "the bright, thin walls of faith."

This simile characterizes faith itself as a kind of room, adding an important point to the poem's overall discussion. The comparison indicates that this living space itself stands as evidence of a kind of faith (and "miraculous[ness]"). Merely by existing, it speaks to a belief in the value of life, and a determination to live.

The simile works in both directions, with the properties of the eggs informing the reader's consideration of faith and vice versa. So, faith is fragile like an egg, but it's precious too—it can be both a vessel for new life and sustenance to nourish people. What's more, eggs are an everyday object, suggesting that faith, too, can be commonplace and simple. This doesn't necessarily have to be religious faith, but could instead be a kind of innate faith in life itself, a faith that's supported by small miracles such as this ramshackle home.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Lines 21-22:** "as if they were / the bright, thin walls of faith."



VOCABULARY

Beams (Line 5) - Parts of a structure that support a ceiling, often made out of wood.

Thrust (Line 7) - Pushed or shoved. Here, this means that the supports the beams rest on have been knocked sideways.

Seams (Line 8) - Seams are the points at which two pieces of material (like building material, in this case) are connected.

Miraculous (Line 10) - This is an important word in the poem, suggesting that the living space is proof of some kind of miracle—the miracle of life itself, perhaps.

Frame (Line 11) - The structure or outline of something. This could refer to the literal structure of the house, or, more abstractly, to the life of the person who lives there.

Fragile (Line 16) - Easily broken.



FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

Form is one of the first things that any reader will notice about "Living Space." The poem doesn't use an established poetic form. Instead, it unfolds on the page as one single block of text.

This single [stanza](#) an important aspect of the poem for a number of reasons. First, the way that the lines all cling together represents the living space itself—the way that the dwelling is held together by whatever materials are at hand,

and without any particular design. The speaker describes how the dwelling looks like it *should* collapse—but it doesn't. So the security of the poetic form—the way that no lines break off into new stanzas—shows the structural integrity of the dwelling in question.

This single block of text also allows for some other interesting relationships between formal aspects of the poem and the world that it describes. The short lines, for example, work with [caesura](#) and [enjambment](#) to suggest that—while the structure is still standing—it's also very precarious. The way that the first three sentences are broken across lines and abruptly stopped by caesuras is reflective of the improvised way in which this home has been put together.

The poem also uses its form to represent "edge[s]" like the one mentioned in line 17 ("the dark edge"). In particular, line 9 ("The whole structure leans dangerously") is the longest line in the poem and literally leans out into the white space of the page, mirroring the way that the living space is exposed to the elements and the risk of its own collapse. In lines 17 and 18 ("hung out" through "slanted universe"), a similar effect is achieved, with both lines taking advantage of their shortness to place "edge" and "universe" at the literal edges of the poem.

METER

"Living Space" is not written with any specific [meter](#). The intentionally haphazard distribution of stresses throughout the lines helps represent the improvised way in which the living space has been put together. (Dharker has said this poem is based on the type of place that is held together by "sticks and sellotape and string.")

This effect is particularly noticeable in line 9, one of the most important lines in the poem:

The **whole structure leans dangerously**

Think how different this would sound if it had a solid and regular meter, for instance one relying on [iamb](#)s:

The **structure is at risk of falling down**

This would give the line an inappropriate sense of security and stability, whereas the lack of regular meter fits logically with the idea of the shaky, uneven "living space."

RHYME SCHEME

"Living Space" doesn't have a [rhyme scheme](#). As with a regular [meter](#), a consistent rhyme scheme would be too structural and formal for this poem. It would be at odds with what the poem is actually describing: a home that has been built in a distinctly informal way.

The poem does use a few [rhymes](#) here and there, though. Line 2's "That" rhymes with "flat" at the end of line 4, and "Beams" in

line 5 rhymes with line 8's "seams." These rhymes are like subtle suggestions of design and structure. After all, the "living space" is just that—a functioning home, made for that purpose. The rhymes, then, as with the poem's examples of [alliteration](#), [assonance](#), and [consonance](#), allow the poem to suggest that, for all its apparent faults, this dwelling *does* work for the person (or people) who lives there.

Two other moments of rhyme achieve a similar effect. The "space"/"place" rhyme across lines 12 and 13 also suggests construction and intent, and their close proximity to one another represents the smallness of the physical space. "White," "light," and "bright" in lines 16, 19, and 22 also ring out loud and clear, momentarily turning up the brightness of the poem's sound and supporting its hopeful conclusion.



SPEAKER

The speaker in "Living Space" is unspecified. The speaker in this poem acts as an external observer, though they are not entirely detached. Indeed, the speaker makes both implicit and explicit judgments throughout the poem.

In the first few lines, the speaker seems to only criticize the living space's haphazard construction, calling it "the problem." Nothing lines up properly, the speaker says, and all the angles are off. From the start of the poem through the end of line 9 ("leans dangerously"), the speaker is almost like a building surveyor, casting a judgemental eye on the fragility of the building.

But in line 10 ("towards the miraculous"), the poem turns, and the speaker's true opinion becomes clear. The speaker wasn't necessarily criticizing the living space, but just being factual. In fact, the speaker ultimately *praises* the living space, seeing it as evidence of "the miraculous." The occupant of the living space doesn't seem to be around, but the speaker notices a sign of life when they look at the eggs hanging in the wire basket. In the poem's closing lines, the speaker opens up the poem's perspective to end on a hopeful note, implicitly suggesting that life itself—its existence and its continuation—is a kind of miracle.



SETTING

Dharker herself has stated that this poem is set in the slums of Mumbai, a major city in India. These are places where people live in extreme poverty, and have to improvise to survive. Dharker has characterized these types of homes as the sort made with "sticks and sellotape and string." However, this isn't a criticism—the poem praises the determination of people to live their lives and make homes for themselves in difficult circumstances. Furthermore, the Mumbai link isn't explicit in the poem itself, and therefore it isn't an essential part of

understanding the poem; the general setting could really be anywhere that people have to figure out how to survive on limited resources.

As the title indicates, the poem's more precise setting is someone's "living space." This is a home that seems to have been made by the person (or people) who lives there, who improvised with whatever materials were at hand. The structure is therefore somewhat precarious, with wonky angles and delicately balanced beams. But, as the title *also* suggests with its use of the word "living," the poem's emphasis is on how this space is itself evidence of life, and proof of something "miraculous" despite its seeming flaws.

of around 700,000 people. Much of this density of population is due to migration, with people moving to the city because of the hope for a better life (with improved economic opportunity).

Part of the poem's intention seems to be to highlight the miraculous and vibrant expression of life that these slums represent. Even though they are difficult and impoverished places to live, they are also places of hope, since the people there persist with their lives despite immense challenges. And though Mumbai was the specific place that inspired the poet, the poem itself doesn't reveal a particular location, indicating that these same ideas could apply to similarly difficult living situations around the world.



CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Imtiaz Dharker is a British poet who was born in Pakistan in 1954. Though born in Lahore, the Pakistani capital, Dharker mostly grew up in Glasgow, Scotland, where her family moved when she was one year old. Dharker studied at the University of Glasgow, graduating with an M.A. in English Literature and Philosophy. She was married to Simon Powell, the founder of a network of poetry events for young people, who died in 2009 from cancer. She divides her time between London and Mumbai, with the slums of the latter city providing part of the inspiration for this poem.

Dharker has published numerous books of poetry, mostly with the publisher Bloodaxe Books. Common themes between the books include questions of identity, home and exile, cultural displacement, and community. Similar themes can be found in Carol Rumens's "[The Emigrée](#)" and W. H. Auden's "[Refugee Blues](#)." Other poets have also used the home as a metaphor for human relationships, as can be seen in Simon Armitage's "[Mother, any distance](#)."

Dharker's poetry is well-established, featuring on the GCSE syllabus in the U.K. and earning Dharker a Cholmondeley Prize in 2011 and a Queen's Gold Medal in 2014. She is also a member of the Royal Society of Literature. In addition to her poetry, Dharker also works as an artist and a documentary maker.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"Living Space" offers little in terms of specific historical context. Dharker has said that she had the slums of Mumbai, India in mind when writing this poem—in particular the "fragility" of those homes and the resourcefulness of the people who put them together with whatever materials are at hand. Despite India's recent rapid economic growth, around 42 percent of the population of Mumbai (India's largest city) is estimated to live in slums. The largest of these is Dharavi, which has a population



MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- [Dharker's Website](#) — The poet's own website, with details of Dharker's other poems and films. (<http://www.imtiazdharker.com>)
- [Mumbai Poems](#) — Contemporary Indian poets select some of their favorite Mumbai poetry. (<https://www.thedailypao.com/for-better-or-verse-five-poets-on-their-favourite-poems-about-the-city/>)
- [More Poems by Dharker](#) — A valuable resource from the Poetry Archive. (<https://poetryarchive.org/poet/imtiaz-dharker/>)
- [A Reading](#) — The poem read by the poet herself. (<https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/guides/z9y76fr/revision/1>)
- [An Interview with Dharker](#) — An informal chat with the poet. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RpdeqEzAKJg>)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER IMTIAZ DHARKER POEMS

- [Tissue](#)



HOW TO CITE

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