

The Emigrée



SUMMARY

Once upon a time there was a country... I left that country when I was still just a kid. My memory of it, however, remains strong and clear as sunlight. That's because apparently I never saw the city in the late fall, a time of year that people tell me comes even to the calmest, warmest of places. So even when I hear really bad news about that country, it can't destroy my happy vision of my old home, which remains strong and clear in my mind, like a heavy paperweight resting on my thoughts. My home country might be filled with violence and dictators now, but I will forever associate it with a feeling of comfort and warmth, with sunlight.

The city's white streets and beautiful hills become even clearer in my mind as time marches on, like an army tank rolling over the past, and as the vast distance between myself my city grows. When I left I took the few words from my native language that I knew as a child, carrying that vocabulary with me like a toy with nothing inside of it. Now, as I learn more words and grammar, my knowledge of that language expands. Soon I'll be totally fluent in it. Though the oppressive regime in my home country tries to ban that language, I can't stop speaking it. Those words are always on my tongue, tasting of the warmth and comfort that I associate with my home.

I don't have a passport and can never go back to my home. My old city visits me, though, flying to me on a white plane. My city lies in front of me as calmly as a piece of paper. I gently brush its hair and look lovingly into its bright eyes. My old city and I go dancing through the night in my new city, which is filled with walls. People gather around and accuse me of being a traitor. They tell me I'm a dark presence in their supposedly free city. Meanwhile, my home city takes cover behind me, afraid of them. They talk about death, but my shadow proves that the sun still shines.

the *unreliability* of memory—the way in which it may lack specifics and seem overly idealized.

Though the speaker left her home country as a child, it continues to exert a strong hold on her. She describes her memory as “sunlight-clear” (suggesting warmth and nourishment in addition to clarity). Indeed, the poem continuously describes memory as a source of light throughout. No matter what dark “news” the speaker hears about where she came from, it “cannot break” her “original view” of her home as a place filled with “white streets” and “graceful slopes.” She is “branded by an impression of sunlight,” meaning she has been forever marked by the memory of the city she has left behind. Her home country is implied to be war-torn and ruled by tyranny, but her memories are presented as something that none of this violence can override.

In fact, her memories only grow *stronger* as time passes and the distance between the speaker's present and past grows larger. Though “time rolls its tanks,” threatening to erode the speaker's memories as the years go by, the speaker holds tightly to what little she has of her home, describing how her memory “tastes of sunlight.”

Ultimately, it's easy to see why memory is so important to the speaker—she has very little else. With not even a passport to call her own, the speaker gives the reader the impression that—in the rush to leave her war-torn home—she was left with little of her possessions. Memory, then, is something she holds onto dearly. That's why she presents herself as a kind of protector of her home city, which “hides behind” her when a shady “they” tries to attack. (This is probably the same “they” that ravaged the city with war in the first place.) Her memory, then, is like a bomb shelter in which some semblance of the city *as it once was* can survive. She tends to it like a pet or a lover, combing “its hair” and staring at “its shining eyes.”

With this in mind, though, there's also something unsettling about the role of memory in this poem. The “sunlight” that it gives is warm and comforting, but it also comes across as blinding. The memory is an “impression,” based on experiences from so long ago that it's hard to say how real or reliable it actually is. The speaker makes clear that this city is not the same as it was when she left it, and that she might not be remembering it accurately in the first place.

Indeed, the speaker left her country with only a “child's vocabulary” and “never saw it in that November / which, I am told, comes to the mildest city.” In other words, she may never have seen the city as it really was, because she was too young to understand, or left before the real horrors began. Her memories of childhood are thus akin to “a hollow”—or empty—“doll.” Even as the poem asserts the lasting power of



THEMES



THE NATURE OF MEMORY

“The Emigrée” is, in large part, about the nature of memories—particularly childhood memories. While also exploring some of the traumatic effects of exile, the poem shows how memory can give people strength—something to hold onto even when everything else around them has changed. Even though the speaker's (unspecified) home country is now ravaged by war and tyranny, the speaker's memory of that place remains an indestructible source of comfort. By the same token, however, the poem also explores

memory, then, it implies that it is also limited and fallible—that it is a soft “impression” of a place, rather than a sharp, accurate photograph.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-16
- Lines 17-25



EXILE AND HOME

“The Emigrée,” as the title suggests, is a poem that tries to convey the pain and confusion of the emigrant experience—to get across an impression of what it is like to have to leave your home (and possibly family) behind. Implicitly, the poem implores its readers not to take their own comforts for granted, and explores the way that corrupted “state” power can undo everything that a person holds dear.

The poem offers no clue as to the speaker’s current living situation. All the reader knows is that this person no longer lives in the city she originally called home—and that there’s no chance of going back. The poem demonstrates the trauma of this experience and, in doing so, shows the way that political turmoil affects individual lives. Indeed, the lack of specifics about the speaker’s situation attests to the way that this is a universal and all-too-common experience.

Exile has ruptured the speaker’s connection with her home. The speaker was a child at the time of the conflict—and perhaps that’s why the poem opens almost like a fairytale, with the phrase, “There once was a country.” This opening also suggests the way that this country no longer exists, at least not in the same form. The speaker’s home, too, no longer exists like it once did (except in her memory).

The speaker’s new relationship with her old home is characterized by distance. The physical distance she has had to travel becomes a [metaphorical](#) distance too, with “news” (media) being the main way that she learns about her country’s current situation. Indeed, the playful descriptions in the third stanza—in which the speaker combs the hair of her city and “love[s] its shining eyes”—is a way of restoring intimacy to her relationship with her home. That is, home is a place people feel deeply connected to. Living in another country, the speaker can only find this connection in her imagination.

Furthermore, her physical displacement becomes a cultural one too. In order to fit in with her new home, the speaker needs to take on new language and customs. But doing so too much would risk erasing her relationship with original home, which is why she holds onto her first language and childhood memories so dearly. This speaks to the sheer psychological complexity of the emigrant experience.

The speaker’s traumatic disconnection from her home land is so severe that there is “no way back at all.” This captures how

emigration can be a fundamental change of circumstances—for some, it is irreversible. The past can’t be retrieved, and the emigrée can’t return to her homeland. Emigration closes off an entire chapter of the speaker’s existence.

The mention of the speaker’s “passport” (or, more accurately, lack thereof) in line 17 is important too. Passports are the official documents of identity, granting access into and out of nations. Weighed against the brilliance of the speaker’s memories and the intense descriptions of childhood, the passport seems like an absurd object in this poem—an arbitrary part of the speaker’s identity. That is, not having a passport doesn’t make the speaker any less able to identify with the home of her youth—it just means she can’t go back. This builds an unsettling sense of an imbalance of power in the poem, the “state” taking charge of who can and can’t call a place home—and “mutter[ing] death” at anyone who might dare to challenge this system.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-6
- Lines 7-8
- Lines 9-16
- Lines 17-25



LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

*There once was ...
... the mildest city.*

“The Emigrée” opens with a mysterious first sentence: “There once was a country...” Immediately, this tells the reader a lot about the rest of the poem. First of all, this phrase [alludes](#) to the typical opening of a fairy tale (“once upon a time”). The poem has a fantastical, dream-like quality running all the way through—and this line helps set that up.

Pushing this idea further, this also means that the reliability of what follows is under question from the beginning. That is, when the speaker presents the deep love that she holds in her memory for her home country, the poem subtly questions how much of this memory is real and how much imagined.

This opening phrase also gently subverts the typical fairy-tale opening by focusing on a *place* (rather than a *time*), demonstrating that the speaker’s identity—as an emigrant from one country to another—is largely defined by *where* she lived as a child and where she lives now. Finally, the ellipsis [caesura](#) that follows this opening remark makes the fairy-tale statement trail off, indicating it is somehow interrupted or incomplete. Subtly, this hints at the way that the speaker’s life itself suffered a kind of rupture when she had to leave her home.

After this caesura, the speaker clarifies which country she is talking about—the one in which she was born and, for a time, raised. She tells the reader how she was forced to leave when she was a child but that her memory of her home city remains strong and clear. The discussion of the memory thus begins an important relationship between memory and light that runs throughout the poem, with light representing warmth, knowledge, and moral goodness.

Lines 2-4 ("but my memory ... the mildest city") are also deliberately vague, the speaker explaining how it "seems" she never saw her city in "that November" which she is "told" visits itself upon "the mildest city." There's a lot of second-hand information here ("seems" and "I am told"), and it's not quite clear what is being discussed. Perhaps the speaker is referencing a particular November—maybe the one in which war took hold of her city—or maybe she is talking about Novembers more generally. Is November meant to represent the coming winter, and, metaphorically, times of death and hardship? Is "the mildest city" her home city, or just a turn of phrase?

It's hard to say, but this is in keeping with the way the poem never offers much in terms of specifics about the speaker's situation. Most likely, this is intended to make the poem more universal, looking for common ground in the emigrant experience.

LINES 5-8

*The worst news ...
... impression of sunlight.*

The second half of the first stanza expands on the relationship between the speaker (the "Emigrée" of the title) and her home city/country. She explains that, whatever terrible "news" she hears about the place nowadays, her childhood memories of it are cherished and indestructible. Using [metaphor](#), she likens these memories to a "bright, filled paperweight," again drawing a connection between light and better times.

It's an interesting metaphor. Presumably, the speaker is referring to the kind of paperweights that depict city scenes and often sold as souvenirs. These, then, are static and idealized scenes—not real life. Furthermore, as souvenirs they tend to be sold to tourists; this hints that the speaker is perhaps herself a tourist too, not of *place* but of *memory*. The [consonance](#) of "bright" and "paperweight" is bright-sounding but also somewhat delicate, suggesting that the speaker's memory is both vibrant and fragile.

Lines 7 and 8 indicate the kind of "news" that the speaker typically hears about her home country. Now, it is a place of "war" and "tyrants." The grammar of the line is important in placing the evil elements that remain in that country on one side and the speaker (with her memories) on the other:

It may be at war, it may be sick with tyrants,

but I am branded by an impression of sunlight.

The [anaphora](#) (highlighted above) stacks "war" and "tyrants" on one side of the sentence's main conjunction ("but"), with the "I" standing in opposition on the other side. The speaker is saying that when she thinks of her home, she invariably gets a feeling of happiness, brightness, and warmth.

At the same time, these lines also show how far removed the speaker is from her original home. "War" and "tyrants" are powerful figures, though, while the speaker has only her "impression of sunlight." This again suggests that the speaker's memory may not be all that accurate; an impression of something is not a high definition image. The use of the word "branded" is also interesting, as it's gently suggestive of violence, torture, and trauma. The [consonance](#) of "but" "branded" and "by" marks the line with similar sounds in the same way that branding leaves a permanent image on skin.

LINES 9-11

*The white streets ...
... close like waves.*

The second stanza delves deeper into the speaker's memory of her home city. Its streets are "white," and its "graceful slopes glow" ever "clearer." This language is in keeping with the poem's link between memory and bright light. On the one hand, this link suggests that the memory has clarity and strength. But such is the brightness and whiteness of this memory that it also seems—to continue the [metaphor](#)—somewhat bleached and hard to define. It's strong, but its edges are fuzzy. The beautiful interplay of [consonance](#) and [assonance](#) across lines 9 and 10 also makes this memory feel lovely but idealized: "the graceful slopes / glow even clearer."

Here, the poem also uses a powerful metaphor to describe time. This depicts time as a kind of army, "roll[ing]" its tanks on the terrain of the speaker's life (the loud [alliteration](#) between "time" and "tanks" signals an aggressive presence). Indeed, time's army puts up "frontiers" (barriers) between the speaker and her home city, the sudden appearance of which the speaker likens to "waves" (through [simile](#)). Not only is the metaphor powerful, it also speaks volumes about the speaker's own state of mind. Having to leave her home would have had a traumatic impact on her life, and the reason she had to leave—the onset of war—colors the way that she thinks about everything (whether it's her original home or time).

LINES 12-16

*That child's vocabulary ...
... tastes of sunlight.*

Lines 12 to 16 are about language. The speaker relates how when she emigrated she carried with her a "child's vocabulary" which eventually "opens and spills a grammar" (develops into something more complex and useful). Essentially, she's saying

that as a kid, she knew fewer words than an adult would. Through [simile](#), the speaker specifically compares the "vocabulary" she carried "here" (her new home country) to a "hollow doll." The speaker is saying that, when she came to her new country, she was equipped only with a few phrases (almost like a wind-up toy) in a language that, as a child, she didn't totally understand yet. The [assonance](#) of /aw/ sounds gives the phrase an open sound that fits with the image of hollowness, while the /l/ [consonance](#) sounds fragile.

Language, of course, is an element in the connection of people to place. With obvious relish, the speaker appears to believe that possessing her original language helps her to *re-possess* her original home. That's why language, to her, isn't some ephemeral, weightless entity—language is a series of "coloured molecule[s]" that she wants to collect. In other words, language is no less real than physical matter itself.

Furthermore, possessing this language (which is never specified) is an act of rebellion. This language is now "banned by the state" in an attempt to erode the speaker's original culture—but keeping it alive is in itself a small victory. Indeed, this victory is intoxicating, almost sensually so. The speaker "can't get it off [her] tongue"—the tongue being part of the physical mechanism of language *and*, importantly, of deriving pleasure from taste. That's why, using synesthesia (a mash-up of different senses), the poem describes this language as *tasting* of "sunlight." Sunlight has already been established as a crucial part of the speaker's memory, denoting goodness, warmth, and knowledge.

LINES 17-20

*I have no ...
... its shining eyes.*

The poem's final stanza develops the relationship between the speaker and her home city. In particular, it [personifies](#) that city in order to make this relationship more intimate and important.

The stanza opens with a very plain, matter-of-fact statement: "I have no passport." This is a brute and stark fact—that it's very difficult for people to move around unless they have the state-approved documentation. This, then, relates to power and displacement—the question of who has the power to dictate which people have to live where. For the speaker, the separation is evidently final ("there's no way back at all"). Accordingly, the importance of her memory becomes even clearer: it's the *only* way that she has to connect to her early life and the place she once considered—and perhaps still considers—her home.

The [personification](#) begins in line 18, in an image that again conflates memory with brightness (as in line 6 and line 10): "my city comes to me in its own white plane." The city shows the speaker affection, almost like some kind of lover, best friend, or even pet. The city lies down in front of the speaker, and she combs its hair and gazes deeply into its shining eyes. These

lines speak to a deep connection between the speaker and her city, an unbreakable bond that can't be severed by emigration. A [simile](#) compares the city's "docility" (its peaceful affection) to paper, which links with the "paperweight" in line 6. Perhaps it also suggests that the city is something which the speaker has to actively create in her memory, as though she has to write it into existence once again. Paper, too, is usually white—suggesting the brightness but also, perhaps, vagueness of the speaker's memory.

LINES 21-25

*My city takes ...
... evidence of sunlight.*

Lines 21 to 25 continue with the [personification](#) of the speaker's city. It's worth noting that the stanza uses the first person possessive determiner (the technical term for the word "my"!) to emphasize the speaker's authority over her own memory. That is, no political entity or army can possess her mind—and accordingly the city that she speaks of belongs to her and her alone.

In the speaker's imagination, her city takes her out dancing "through the city of walls." Dancing is an expression of joy and freedom, deliberately at odds with the oppression of "tyrants" referred to earlier in the poem. The "city of walls" is perhaps the speaker's home city as it is now, under the harsh rule of tyranny, or it refers to the speaker's *new* city. Perhaps she is living in a sort of refugee camp, or otherwise separated from the locals in her new city and as such feels it is a place of "walls."

In either case, the speaker and her city become an image of freedom taking place within a wider context of anguish and strife. The [caesura](#) in line 22 is particularly powerful, creating a harsh (full) stop after the word "walls." This puts up a barrier in the poetic line, stopping the carefree sound of line 21—with its dance-like [diacope](#) of the repeated "city"—in its tracks.

The rest of line 22 and lines 23-24 introduce a new pronoun into the poem: "They." The specifics of this third-person plural pronoun are intentionally left out, giving the word a vague but real sense of threat and menace. This might refer to people from the speaker's old home—the tyrants who forced her to leave—or to people in the speaker's new city, who are suspicious of outsiders like the speaker.

This "they" are the speaker's accusers, circling her like vultures. They accuse her of "absence," even though she was forced to emigrate. They also accuse her "being dark in their free city." The use of "darkness" is in keeping with the poem's general link between light and goodness, but could also speak to a racial element being involved in the speaker's original exile. Indeed, a lot of emigration owes itself to racial or prejudicial persecution, forcing groups of people to choose between their lives or their homes. The use of "free" to describe this alternative city is therefore ironic, part of the propaganda used that "they" use to enforce their regime.

The speaker's city, scared of this "they," cowers behind the speaker. She is its protector, because she is the keeper of her memory. The poem's closing phrase is tense and ambiguous, the undefined "they mutter[ing] death." This utterance contrasts with the speaker's joyful relationship with her original language outlined in the second stanza. Whereas she "tastes" "sunlight," "they" taste only "death."

The final line is complex. The speaker's shadow—which is a kind of absence—is proof of "sunlight." That's because shadows are the absence of light, and therefore can only exist in places where light falls. Darkness and light are thus interweaved in a difficult—perhaps traumatic—relationship, both proving the existence of the other. Similarly, the speaker is as much defined by her *absence* from her home city as she is by having once lived there.



SYMBOLS



LIGHT

Throughout the poem, the speaker's memory is consistently linked with light. In the first stanza, the speaker describes her recollections as "sunlight-clear;" later in the same stanza, it is a "bright, filled paperweight" and "an impression of sunlight." Contrasted with the mention of war and the bleak weather of November, light starts to represent warmth, knowledge, and moral virtue.

That's why the streets—in the speaker's memory—are "white" with light, "glow[ing]" ever "clearer" even as time passes by. It seems the more negative news the speaker hears about her home city as it is now, the more loving, affectionate, and compassionate the city becomes in her memory. And in the poem's final image, the speaker sees her own existence as "evidence of sunlight"—that is, the fact that she is still alive, still casting a "shadow," proves that there is moral good in the world beyond the darkness of the city under the rule of tyrants.

At the same time, this reliance on light also introduces a note of doubt into the poem. The memory is so bright and "white" that there is a sense in which it starts to become bleached and undefined, suggesting that it might also be overly idealized in the speaker's mind.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "sunlight-clear"
- **Line 6:** "bright, filled paperweight"
- **Line 8:** "an impression of sunlight"
- **Line 9:** "white streets"
- **Line 10:** "glow even clearer"
- **Line 16:** "tastes of sunlight"
- **Line 18:** "white plane"

- **Line 20:** "shining eyes"
- **Line 23:** "dark in their free city"
- **Line 25:** "my shadow falls as evidence of sunlight"



POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

[Alliteration](#) is used sporadically throughout "The Emigrée." It is first used in line 1:

There once **w**as a country... I left it as a child

The /w/ sound adds to the sing-song, fairy-tale like opening statement of the poem. Lines 2 and 3 then alliterate on the /m/, /n/, and /s/ sounds:

but **m**y memory of it is sunlight-clear
for it seems I never saw it in that **N**ovember

This cluster of alliteration continues the poem's lyrical tone. The opening lines *sound* pretty and poetic—which makes sense, given that the speaker is describing her beloved home.

The next significant alliteration is in line 8, with: "but I am **b**randed by an impression of sunlight." This relates to the way that the speaker experiences her memory: it is something permanent and unshakeable, a source of strength. For this reason, it is "branded" on her life. To match, the line is itself branded by plosive /b/ sounds. These sounds, however, in their connection to the word "branded," also hint at torture and violence (which is one of the most common reasons why people have to emigrate in the first place).

As if in reference to line 8's alliteration, lines 15 and 16 return to this /b/ sound. Here, the speaker is describing forms of oppression used by the state to exert its power. The /b/ sounds dominate the line, barely allowing other sounds to exist:

It may **b**y now **b**e a lie, **b**anned by the state
but I can't ...

The alliterating /t/ sounds in "tongue" and "tastes" come along like a kind of relief from this /b/ sound, and emphasize the intensity of the speaker's memories.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "o," "w"
- **Line 2:** "m," "m," "s"
- **Line 3:** "s," "n," "s," "N"
- **Line 7:** "m," "b," "m," "b"
- **Line 8:** "b," "b," "b"

- **Line 9:** "s," "c," "g," "s," "l"
- **Line 10:** "g," "l," "cl," "t," "t"
- **Line 11:** "cl"
- **Line 15:** "b," "b," "b," "b"
- **Line 16:** "b," "t," "t"
- **Line 17:** "n," "n"

ALLUSION

[Allusion](#) is used once in "The Emigrée"—in the very first line:

"There once was a country..."

This opening seems to clearly mimic the classic first sentence from fairy tales: "once upon a time." This usually introduces stories that are mythic, fantastical, and/or folkloric in nature. This perhaps indicates an element of unreliability in the speaker's account, and also gestures towards her reliance on her imagination to keep her city alive in her mind.

It's also interesting to consider the way that "once upon a time" has an equivalent phrase in many other languages, making it a common element across different cultures. This speaks to the way that the poem, too, is partly about finding a common ground in the emigrant experience (which is why the reader never learns where the speaker has come from nor where she has moved to).

But Rumens's line is not quite the *same* as the fairy-tale beginning, just similar. The clear difference is that, while the fairy-tale opening focuses on time, Rumens' is as much about *place*. This "country" is contained in the past tense, which has now taken on an almost mythical sense of distance and significance for the speaker.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "There once was a country..."

ASSONANCE

[Assonance](#) is used often in "The Emigrée."

An early example is in line 8. In addition to alliterative /u/ and long /i/ sounds, the speaker employs the short /a/ sound:

but I am branded by an impression of sunlight.

Combined with the [alliterative](#) /b/ sounds, these /a/ vowels stamp their presence on the line. This mimics the way that branding something means *impressing* it with a particular image. In turn, this shows how the speaker's memory has a permanent effect on her life.

Next, in the first two lines of stanza two, the open /o/ sounds of "slopes" and "glow" have a calm and pretty sound, matching the

speaker's memory of her home city as a graceful and light-filled place (even if that light may only be a memory).

Line 13 ("like a hollow doll, opens and spills a grammar") is expressly about language itself, and the assonance reflects this. When the speaker compares her small "child's vocabulary" to the insides of a doll, the long and short /o/ vowels in "hollow doll, opens" make the line feel open too. The second half of the line, "and spills a grammar," switches to the short /a/ sound. This new sound suggests that the speaker's small collection of words is growing.

In line 20, in the middle of stanza three, the /i/ sounds of "shining eyes" help convey the warm and affectionate relationship that the speaker feels she has with her city (or, at least, with the memory of her city).

In lines 21-24, the speaker repeats long /i/, /e/, and /a/ sounds, as a "they" pursues the speaker throughout the city:

My city takes me dancing through the city
of walls. They accuse me of absence, they circle me.
They accuse me of being dark in their free city.
My city hides behind me. They mutter death

At first, the repeated /i/ and /e/ sounds mimic the "dancing" of the speaker and her city. Then, however, the repeated sounds begin to capture how the "they" seems to relentlessly persecute the speaker. By line 24, these repeated sounds reach a claustrophobic pitch. Thus, throughout "The Emigrée," assonance captures a range of emotions.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "o," "a," "o," "e," "i"
- **Line 2:** "u," "y," "e," "o," "i," "i," "u," "i," "ea"
- **Line 3:** "ee," "l," "e," "i," "i," "o," "e"
- **Line 4:** "l," "o," "l"
- **Line 5:** "e," "ea"
- **Line 6:** "i," "i," "ie," "i," "a," "e;"
- **Line 7:** "l," "a," "e," "l," "e," "l," "i," "y"
- **Line 8:** "l," "a," "a," "y," "a," "o," "u," "i"
- **Line 9:** "ee," "y," "o"
- **Line 10:** "o," "e," "ea," "i," "o," "a"
- **Line 11:** "ie," "i," "ee," "o," "a"
- **Line 12:** "a," "l," "o," "a," "y," "l," "a," "ie," "e"
- **Line 13:** "o," "o," "o," "o," "a," "a"
- **Line 14:** "a," "a," "o," "o," "o," "l"
- **Line 15:** "l," "a," "y," "ie," "y," "a"
- **Line 16:** "l," "i," "o," "l," "u," "i"
- **Line 17:** "a," "o," "a," "o," "a," "a"
- **Line 18:** "y," "y," "e," "l," "l," "l," "a"
- **Line 19:** "l," "ie," "l," "o," "o," "a"
- **Line 20:** "l," "l," "l," "e"
- **Line 21:** "y," "y," "e," "l," "y"

- **Line 22:** “ey,” “e,” “ey,” “e”
- **Line 23:** “ey,” “e,” “ei,” “ee,” “y”
- **Line 24:** “y,” “y,” “i,” “e,” “i,” “e,” “ey”
- **Line 25:** “a,” “a,” “a,” “o,” “u”

CAESURA

"The Emigrée" makes frequent use of [caesura](#). It is first used in the very first line, just after the fairy tale-like opening phrase: "There once was a country..." The ellipsis here (the three dots) signals a transition between one time and another—between the speaker's present moment and the memory of her childhood. But it also suggests a kind of trailing off or incompleteness, hinting at the way that the memory, though strong, is a little fuzzy. The rest of the caesurae in the first stanza form part of the poem's fairly conversational tone (which is balanced against its strange imagery).

The next significant caesura is in line 13. Here, the speaker describes how when she left her home country she was like a "hollow doll." Her small vocabulary from back then now "opens and spills a grammar." The caesura before "opens" places a stress on this particular word ("opens"), bringing this image to life. That is, the rest of the line, with its greater variety of vowels, literally "spills" out after the comma. Later in the stanza, the caesura in line 16 places emphasis on the phrase, "It tastes of sunlight," highlighting the sensual nature of the speaker's memory.

The next key caesura is in line 22. This one sticks out among the other caesurae because it comes so early in the line. And because it comes after the word "walls," it symbolizes the putting up of barriers—the oppression of freedom. The line is literally stopped in its tracks as thought at gunpoint. As in the rest of the poem, caesura here is used expressively and emphatically.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “country... I”
- **Line 4:** “which, I,” “told, comes”
- **Line 6:** “view, the,” “bright, filled”
- **Line 7:** “war, it”
- **Line 9:** “city, the”
- **Line 11:** “us, close”
- **Line 13:** “doll, opens”
- **Line 15:** “lie, banned”
- **Line 16:** “tongue. It”
- **Line 17:** “passport, there’s”
- **Line 19:** “me, docile”
- **Line 22:** “walls. They,” “absence, they”
- **Line 24:** “me. They”

CONSONANCE

[Consonance](#) is used consistently throughout "The Emigrée." A number of instances of consonance are also [alliteration](#) (because they happen at the beginning of words); these are covered in the alliteration section of this guide.

The first stanza is full of bright sounds, in particular hard /t/ sounds. These help get across the vibrant brightness of the speaker's memory, the "white streets" she remembers of her home city. But the sounds are almost *too* bright, dominating the stanza in a way that also perhaps suggests that this memory is somewhat bleached too—flooded with light to the point of becoming unclear or undefined.

In line 8, the use of /b/, /m/, and /n/ consonance makes the line more uniform in sound: "but I am branded by an impression of sunlight." This has the effect of "brand[ing]" the line with particular sounds, marking its identity—in the same way that the speaker is defined by the memories of her childhood.

In lines 9 and 10, the poem allows itself a brief moment of beautiful, almost melodic consonance: "graceful slopes glow." The prettiness of these words helps evoke the extent to which the speaker treasures the memory "the white streets" of her city.

Line 16 returns to the /t/ sound: "but I can't get it off my tongue. It tastes of sunlight." Here the speaker describes how her original language remains on her tongue (partly because she refuses to forget it). The /t/s are distributed throughout the line, refusing to budge, and symbolizing the speaker's determination to hold on to—and expand—her "child's vocabulary."

In the poem's last four lines, the poem ramps up its use of hard /c/ and /s/ sounds:

of walls. They accuse me of absence, they circle me.
They accuse me of being dark in their free city.
My city hides behind me. They mutter death,
and my shadow falls as evidence of sunlight.

These have a harsh quality, matching the focus on "they"—the oppressors of the speaker's home country (or even of her new city). The hard /c/ sounds—like the one in "accuse"—are aggressive, while the /s/ sounds are like whispered gossip, creating a sense that the speaker is surrounded by aggressive voices.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “o,” “nc,” “w,” “s,” “n,” “t,” “f,” “t,” “t,” “s”
- **Line 2:** “m,” “m,” “m,” “t,” “s,” “s,” “l,” “t,” “l,” “r”
- **Line 3:** “r,” “t,” “s,” “s,” “n,” “r,” “s,” “t,” “n,” “N,” “m,” “r”
- **Line 4:** “m,” “t,” “ld,” “m,” “s,” “t,” “m,” “ld,” “st,” “c,” “t”
- **Line 5:** “r,” “s,” “n,” “s,” “r,” “c,” “t,” “nn,” “t,” “r”

- **Line 6:** "r," "b," "r," "t," "p," "p," "r," "t"
- **Line 7:** "t," "n," "b," "w," "t," "m," "b," "s," "w," "t," "ts"
- **Line 8:** "b," "t," "m," "b," "n," "d," "d," "b," "n," "m," "n," "n," "t"
- **Line 9:** "t," "st," "ts," "t," "c," "t," "g," "c," "l," "s," "l," "s"
- **Line 10:** "gl," "l," "s," "t," "lls," "ts," "t," "s"
- **Line 11:** "n," "n," "t," "s," "s," "t," "s," "l," "s," "l," "s"
- **Line 12:** "l," "c," "l," "r," "c," "rr," "r"
- **Line 13:** "l," "ll," "ll," "p," "s," "s," "lls," "r," "r"
- **Line 14:** "ll," "v," "v," "c," "l," "l," "c," "l," "t"
- **Line 15:** "t," "b," "n," "b," "b," "nn," "b," "st," "t"
- **Line 16:** "b," "t," "t," "t," "t," "t," "t," "st," "s," "s," "t"
- **Line 17:** "n," "p," "ss," "p," "s," "n"
- **Line 18:** "m," "c," "m," "s," "m," "n," "t," "s," "n," "t," "n"
- **Line 19:** "d," "n," "n," "n," "d," "c," "s," "p," "p"
- **Line 20:** "s," "s," "n," "n," "s"
- **Line 21:** "M," "c," "t," "t," "s," "m," "c," "th," "th," "c"
- **Line 22:** "s," "Th," "cc," "s," "m," "s," "c," "th," "c," "c," "m"
- **Line 23:** "Th," "cc," "s," "m," "r," "k," "th," "r," "r," "c"
- **Line 24:** "M," "c," "t," "h," "d," "s," "h," "d," "m," "Th," "m," "tt," "d," "th"
- **Line 25:** "lls," "s," "n," "c," "s," "n"

DIACOPE

[Diacope](#) is used a few times in "The Emigrée."

The first instance is in line 7, with the repeated "it may be":

It may be at war, it may be sick with tyrants,
but I am branded by an impression of sunlight.

The speaker uses this diacope to set up an opposition between line 7 and line 8. On the one hand are "war" and "tyrants," the malign influences that have come to dominate her home country. On the other, the speaker's memory. This memory is like "sunlight," conveying warmth, emotion, knowledge, and freedom. In other words, this is a kind of battle between the reality of the speaker's country and her own ideals. The diacope captures how "war" and "tyrants" won't be victorious over the speaker, because the speaker's memories are hers and hers alone—and she will cherish them throughout her life.

A similar moment occurs in line 17:

I have no passport, there's no way back at all
but my city comes to me in its own white plane.

Here, the repeated "no" again emphasizes the direness of the speaker's situation. Yet the line that follows once more restates the power of the speaker's memory—how the speaker's city returns to her as memory, [metaphorically](#) described as a "white plane."

The final instance of diacope takes place during the poem's final five lines, and is really a whole bunch of repeated words:

My city takes me dancing through the city
of walls. They accuse me of absence, they circle me.
They accuse me of being dark in their free city.
My city hides behind me. They mutter death,
and my shadow falls as evidence of sunlight.

The speaker repeats the words "my," "city," "they," and "me."

First, the repetition of "city" captures the relationship between the speaker's old city and the one she lives in now. Then, the poem is literally invaded by a new pronoun that hasn't previously occurred: "They." This sinister group pronoun—which is not given any detail or definition at all—can be interpreted in two ways. It can stand for malicious groups in the speaker's home country. Or it can represent the people who live in the speaker's new "free city," who refuse to welcome her because she is "dark." In either case, the speaker's idealized memory of her city ("my city") is directly contrasted with the stark facts of reality, represented by the "they."

Where Diacope appears in the poem:

- **Line 7:** "It may be," "it may be"
- **Line 17:** "no," "no"
- **Line 21:** "My," "city," "me," "city"
- **Line 22:** "They," "me," "they," "me"
- **Line 23:** "They," "me"
- **Line 24:** "My," "me," "They"
- **Line 25:** "my"

METAPHOR

[Metaphor](#) is used throughout "The Emigrée."

There is one principal metaphor that takes precedence over the others, which is the portrayal of memory as a kind of sunlight. In the first stanza, the speaker's memory is "sunlight-clear," a "bright, filled paperweight," and "an impression of sunlight" that "brands" her. This helps convey the importance of the speaker's memory: the sun is a kind of life force, providing warmth and light to the world. Indeed, without it there probably wouldn't be any life at all! This shows that the speaker's memory is essentially indispensable.

The image of a "paperweight" is a slightly modified take on this main metaphor. Paperweights are often made of glass, and therefore catch the light (reinforcing the brightness of the speaker's memory). Interestingly, though, the poem suggests that this metaphorical "paperweight" might be like the ones that contain an image of a city within (e.g. a London paperweight with a picture of Big Ben). This gently suggests that the speaker is almost like a tourist, exiled from her home and only able to visit through a kind of mental travel—her memory. And the fact that this memory is depicted as an "impression" questions its reliability.

Lines 9 and 10 continue the relationship between light and

memory. Line 9 presents an almost heaven-like image of the speaker's city:

The white streets of that city, the graceful slopes
glow even clearer as time rolls its tanks

Yet line 10 follows it up with a more menacing metaphor—time as a kind of army, its tanks rolling by. This relates to the "war" and "tyrants" mentioned in line 7. Additionally, it shows how the speaker stands in *opposition* to the oppressors of her home country, and it compares that opposition to the speaker's refusal to forget. She won't let time be victorious over her.

In line 14, the speaker's original language is metaphorically presented as "coloured molecule[s]." Molecules are the building blocks of matter, and so this metaphor helps underscore the vital importance of the speaker's "child's vocabulary" (which she has since expanded). It also presents language as something physical and tangible. The end of the stanza further captures this idea by saying the speaker's language "tastes of sunlight," as if both language and sunlight could be tasted.

The final stanza also uses metaphor. This is [personification](#), and is covered in that section of the guide. As with the speaker's other uses of metaphor, it captures her intense relationship with the memory of her city.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "my memory of it is sunlight-clear"
- **Line 6:** "my original view, the bright, filled paperweight."
- **Line 7:** "it may be sick with tyrants"
- **Line 8:** "I am branded by an impression of sunlight."
- **Lines 9-10:** "The white streets of that city, the graceful slopes / glow even clearer as time rolls its tanks"
- **Line 14:** "Soon I shall have every coloured molecule of it."
- **Line 16:** "It tastes of sunlight"
- **Line 19:** "It lies down in front of me,"
- **Line 20:** "I comb its hair and love its shining eyes."
- **Lines 21-22:** "My city takes me dancing through the city / of walls."
- **Line 24:** "My city hides behind me."

PERSONIFICATION

[Personification](#) is used throughout "The Emigrée," primarily in the third and final stanza.

The first use of personification—which is also a type of [metaphor](#)—is in line 7. Here, the speaker refers to "news" she hears about her home country and city. She has heard that it is at war, and ruled by "tyrants." This is characterized through personification as a kind of sick[ness]. The city is "sick with tyrants." It is as though corruption and oppression are horrible diseases, infecting the city's body.

Line 9 offers a very different type of personification. The

speaker describes the "slopes" of her city as "graceful." While this word doesn't *necessarily* indicate personification, it seems to preempt the last stanza's description of the city as a kind of dancer that takes the speaker's hand. The idea of grace and free movement contrasts with the static, bedridden state of being "sick."

As mentioned above, it's in the final stanza when the personification really takes shape. The city "comes to" the speaker in the "white plane" of her memory (which could be an abstract plane as in geometry, or an airplane). It lies before her lovingly, and she "combs its hair" and stares into its beautiful eyes. This personification establishes a deep and intimate connection between the speaker and her city. There is a kind of shared love, like that of best friends or lovers, that is characterized by freedom and joy—the very aspects of life that the city's oppressors seem to have stamped down on. The way that the "city hides behind" the speaker indicates that she is in some way its protector, keeping it alive in her memory.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Line 7:** "it may be sick with tyrants"
- **Line 9:** "the graceful slopes"
- **Line 11:** "us"
- **Lines 18-22:** "my city comes to me in its own white plane. / It lies down in front of me, docile as paper; / I comb its hair and love its shining eyes. / My city takes me dancing through the city / of walls."
- **Line 24:** "My city hides behind me."

SIMILE

[Simile](#) is used three times in "The Emigrée."

The first instance is in the second stanza, and is actually contained within a series of [metaphors](#). The speaker's city "glow[s]" in her memory while "time rolls its tanks" and puts up barriers between the speaker and her city:

the frontiers rise between us, close like waves.

The word "close" can either be read as a verb or an adjective. That is, these "frontiers" can be interpreted as *closing* like waves meeting the shore, or as physically *close* to the speaker and her memory.

Either way, the simile is a little ironic. Frontiers (specifically the borders between countries) are *not* like waves because they are man-made and artificial—borders only really exist within human society. Furthermore, while waves are always moving, borders are imagined to be stable and solid. So, by comparing these unlike things, the simile highlights how arbitrary and unnatural human frontiers can be.

The second simile is in the same stanza, occurring in lines 12 and 13. Here, the speaker talks about the smattering of her

original language that she possessed as a child. She likens her child self to "a hollow doll" that nonetheless contains her limited "vocabulary." Presumably through continued learning and determination, the speaker's language now "opens and spills a grammar." This simile highlights the importance of language to identity, and how integral it is to the way the speaker perceives her old life.

The poem's final simile is again contained within a metaphor (as well as [personification](#)). The speaker says her city metaphorically "lies down in front of me, docile as paper." Here, the city's personified docility is compared to paper. It's a striking simile. Just as paper can receive the marks of written language, the city acts as a vessel for the speaker's memories. This simile once again captures the importance of language. In fact, this moment can even be seen as referring to the poem itself, which commits the speaker's reflections on her city to paper.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Line 11:** "the frontiers rise between us, close like waves."
- **Lines 12-13:** "That child's vocabulary I carried here / like a hollow doll, opens and spills a grammar."
- **Line 19:** "docile as paper"



VOCABULARY

Sunlight-clear (Line 2) - Easily seen; the speaker is saying that her memories appear as brightly and clearly as if illuminated by sunlight.

Tyrants (Line 7) - Oppressive rulers.

Frontiers (Line 11) - Borders or barriers. Frontiers usually mark a point beyond which is wilderness, or, more generally, the unknown.

The state (Line 15) - The official government and its institutions.

Docile (Line 19) - Calm and submissive.



FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"The Emigrée" consists of three stanzas. On first glance they might appear to be of equal length, but they aren't. The first two stanzas are octets—eight-line stanza—while the final stanza is actually nine lines in length. There isn't a strong reason as to why this is—rather, it seems to follow the intuition of the speaker. That said, because the stanzas are roughly the same size, they each carry equal weight, and each take a different approach to the speaker's subject.

The first stanza opens with a phrase that [alludes](#) to the clichéd opening line of a fairy tale: *once upon a time*. This sets up the rest of the speaker's discussion about the relationship between her old city and her childhood memory, but also indicates that what follows is *also* a kind of tussle between reality and imagination. That is, like a fairy-tale, the speaker's memory relies on a degree of fantasy.

The second stanza focuses on language. The speaker gives more details about her situation without ever making it specific in terms of time or place. Rather, she discusses how leaving her childhood home has affected her experience of her native language.

The third stanza concentrates on the way that keeping the city alive in the speaker's memory is in itself an act of rebellion. Like the other stanzas, it is very [metaphorical](#). It compares the speaker's relationship with her native city to a kind of dance—a dance that is eventually persecuted by a malicious "they." The speaker tries to protect her positive memories of her city from this "they."

METER

"The Emigrée" does not have a strictly defined [meter](#). The lines are *approximately* organized by having five [stresses](#) in each, but this is fairly irregular throughout. As such, the poem is best classified as [free verse](#)—its rhythms flow and change as it progresses, reflecting its thoughtful, almost stream-of-consciousness tone. Most of the poem's effects are achieved through its imagery and sound, rather than its establishment or disruption of rhythm. Overall, the poem is fairly conversational in tone (though the content is itself quite fantastical) and the *lack* of strict rhythm helps create this sound.

There are, however, a couple of notable moments relating to the placement of stresses. Here is line 13 (quoted with 12 for context):

That child's vocabulary I carried here
like a hollow doll, opens and spills a grammar.

The arrangement of stresses here emphasizes the line's two active verbs, "opens and spills," bringing them more to life. By disrupting any potential [iambic](#) (da DUM) pattern, this line acts like a "spill[age]" of stresses. (It doesn't make sense to break this line down to individual [feet](#), however, since the whole point is that it's so irregular.)

Another beautiful moment occurs in line 21:

My cit- | y takes | me danc- | ing through | the city

Here the poem briefly establishes a regular iambic [pentameter](#) (five iambs in a row) with one extra unstressed syllable at the end (something called a [feminine ending](#)). This conveys the image of the dance, the speaker and the city moving together

joyfully.

Taken together, these two examples illustrate the range of the poem's rhythms, which fluctuate between something like regular iambic pentameter and freer, more impressionistic lines.

RHYME SCHEME

"The Emigrée" is an unrhymed poem. Having regular rhymes would probably feel too neat and tidy for a poem with such a conversational, introspective tone. Instead, the poem relies on devices like [assonance](#) and [consonance](#) to lend the poem a sense of musicality. Take the lilting /w/ sounds in "once was," which add to the sing-song, fairy-tale quality of the poem's opening line. The assonance towards the end of the stanza is again evocative, the many /ay/, long and short /i/ sounds making these lines feel melodious and lyrical:

... cannot break
my original view, the bright, filled paperweight.
It may be at war, it may be sick with tyrants,
but I am branded by an impression of sunlight.

"Break" and "paperweight" could even be considered [slant rhymes](#) here, as could "tanks" and "waves" in the next stanza. But, again, there is no clear pattern to the poem's use of subtle rhyme. Instead, the subtler assonance and consonance reflect the strength and beauty of the speaker's memories.



SPEAKER

The speaker in "The Emigrée" is the emigrée herself. This identifies the speaker as a woman because of the female spelling of the title word (the extra "e" is a feminine ending). An emigrée is someone who has left her country—here, it's implied, for reasons of political unrest.

The poem is told in the [first-person](#), with the speaker reflecting on her exile from her home country. She was a child when this happened, and holds on dearly to her childhood memory. This memory is so "bright" as to suggest that it may be unreliable, idealized to the point that it's hard to say whether it's real or not.

The speaker has by no means forgotten her home country. She still keeps up with "news" about what's happening there, and actively maintains her relationship with her original language. Indeed, she sees herself as the protector of the memory of what her home city was like before the onset of oppression.

That said, the speaker offers no specifics about her experience as an emigrant. The poem is heavily reliant on [figurative language](#), and doesn't reveal anything about where the speaker emigrated from or immigrated to—nor does it offer any clue as to time or place. This makes the poem feel more universal, a

look at the emigrant experience more widely. Indeed, emigration happens all over the world.



SETTING

The poem is deliberately vague about its setting. It never lets on where the emigrée now lives, nor where she lived when she was a child. This makes the poem more general—it's about anyone who has had to flee their country. Indeed, people have had to emigrate for various reasons throughout human history, so it is a fairly universal experience.

Ultimately, the poem takes place in the speaker's memory. She conjures up a recollection of her childhood home, the memory bright and full of [metaphorical](#) "sunlight." This contrasts with what she hears about her home country as it is now—"at war" and "sick with tyrants."

As the poem progresses, the speaker reveals that "there's no way back at all" to her old country. Furthermore, things in her new country are not as she might hope: "They accuse me of being dark in their free city." Thus, even as the poem takes place in the speaker's memory, it uses the facts of the real world as a source of contrast. These facts highlight how the speaker clings to her memories as a source of inspiration.



CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Carol Rumens is a contemporary British poet born in 1944. She grew up in London before studying in Manchester. Since then, she has worked widely in Britain's universities, teaching creative writing. She published her first collection, *A Strange Girl in Bright Colours*, in 1973, and has published many others since.

Rumens counts the Russian poets [Anna Akhmatova](#) and [Osip Mandelstam](#) among her influences. Indeed, she is quoted as saying that these two poets were a particular influence on "The Emigrée": "The poem is about conflict between imagination and convention. The speaker is an inner emigré—not politically but emotionally. I think it relates to my interest in Russian writers such as Akhmatova and Mandelstam." That isn't to say that the poem isn't in part about politics and nationhood too—after all, it's because of the situation in her home country that the speaker has to leave. Rumens is also influenced by Irish poets such as [Paul Muldoon](#), [Ciaran Carson](#), [Medbh McGuckian](#), and [Michael Longley](#).

There are a number of poems on a similar subject. Good poems for comparison include W.H. Auden's "[Refugee Blues](#)," "[Self-Portrait as Exit Wounds](#)" by Ocean Vuong, and "[Instead of Losing](#)" by John Ashbery.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

One of the most noticeable aspects of "The Emigrée" is that it intentionally *lacks* a specific historical context. Arguably, this makes the poem read like the chronicle of a universal experience. It explores the difficult trauma of being forced to leave your home for good, and offers a depiction of how to keep the memory of that home alive.

Emigration forms a large part of the human story. The Bible, for example, is full of the mass migration of peoples from one part of the earth to another. Other famous mass movements include the settlement of America by pilgrims, and the Jewish diaspora.

Emigration happens for many reasons. As is stated in this poem, it often relates to war, conflict, and oppression. Sadly, this is hardly a thing of the past. Recent events in Syria, to name one example among many, have forced large numbers of people out of their homes and into a search for a new place to live. Though the poem avoids specific context details, the tank [metaphor](#) in line 10 dates it to the 20th century or later.

- [Rumens's Picks](https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/dec/03/observer-poetry-books-of-2017-karen-mccarthy-woolf-nick-makoha-ishion-hutchinson) – Carol Rumens selects her favorite poetry of 2017. (<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/dec/03/observer-poetry-books-of-2017-karen-mccarthy-woolf-nick-makoha-ishion-hutchinson>)
- [Poems about Emigration and Exile](https://www.poetryfoundation.org/collections/144265/poems-on-immigration) – A great selection of poems on similar subjects from the Poetry Foundation. (<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/collections/144265/poems-on-immigration>)
- [Poems by Anna Akhmatova](https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/anna-akhmatova) – Works by the Russian Poet Akhmatova, cited by Rumens as an influence on "The Emigrée." (<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/anna-akhmatova>)



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MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- [Rumens In Her Own Words](http://lidiavianu.scriptmania.com/carol_rumens.htm) – An insightful interview with the poet. (http://lidiavianu.scriptmania.com/carol_rumens.htm)