

Boxes



SUMMARY

The speaker describes a woman's balcony in Mumbai, where an orchid (which she secretly brought home in her luggage from a trip to Singapore) grows. Its roots are hanging on desperately to the air. The blazing October sun is softer for just a couple of hours each morning, and it lies gently on the orchid's leaves. The woman's apartment is only nine steps across from the front door to the balcony. It makes her feel like she's a huge bug trapped in a jar.

On one side of the woman's one-room apartment, there's a stove where she cooks lentils. They smell great. The sing-song sounds of people's voices come in through the barred window. The woman's husband sits with his back to the wall next to a heap of quilts that looks like it's about to topple over.

There should have been a note on the door of this apartment declaring that it only offers enough room to sleep in, preparing you for cramped muscles. All you can do here is tumble inside and take your shoes off. At a right angle to this narrow room with a bed in it, trains roll past on their way to unknown places. Out the window, not blocked by the woman's curtains, you can see two huge black pigs (either dead or asleep) lying on a garbage pile.

The city just gets bigger every day, and it squashes people under its feet, crushing students, wives, lovers, and children. The apartments, meanwhile, only get tinier. The nearby ocean is just a memory of crashing waves and neon light, though it once sang out like a mermaid to the seven islands of Mumbai. The sky withdraws further inland as if striding on huge stilts, unable to be held back, blocking the light.

orchid she's growing on her balcony, whose "roots cling to air" as it overgrows its pot. Like that orchid, she's doing her best to blossom in a space that's simply too small for her, a place where she can't comfortably put down her own [metaphorical](#) roots. Her flat is only "nine steps" wide "from door to balcony" and has just one room. While she cooks on one side of the room, her husband sits on the other side "with his back to the wall," apparently trying to stay out of the way. Doing normal, everyday things in a space this cramped is difficult.

The world around this tiny flat feels oppressive, too. The window has bars, the "sing-song" of voices comes through the walls at all hours, and the only view is of "two giant black pigs" lying in a "dump," either sleeping or dead on a heap of trash. These images suggest that the woman and her husband are living in a city where *everyone* is hemmed in, living on top of each other. (Everyone, that is, but the rich; it's hard to imagine that this couple's landlord lives like they do). Noise and smells constantly press in on tiny spaces. Moreover, the natural world (aside from those pigs) gets shut out and built over: even the "sea" around Mumbai is just a "distant memory" these days, invisible behind walls of buildings.

Not only is this living situation cramped, uncomfortable, and stifling, it's precarious. Like the orchid whose roots "cling to air," the couple seem to just barely be clinging to their life here. Repeated images of falling (whether it's "fall[ing] in" the door of the room or the unwieldy stack of quilts that "threaten[s] to fall" on the husband) hint that this pair are only just keeping their foothold even in this sub-ideal situation.

This, the poem's speaker laments, is just the state of things in Mumbai these days. "Every day the city grows taller," they say—and as it does, it "tramp[es] underfoot" its own citizens. The city's growth, in other words, takes precedence over the happiness and wellbeing of the people who live in it. And this isn't just Mumbai's problem, the poem hints. Wherever cities expand limitlessly, people end up living in increasingly inhumane conditions, unable to make real and comfortable homes for themselves in the tiny "Boxes" of space allotted to them.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-20



THEMES



THE OPPRESSIVE NATURE OF URBAN LIFE

"Boxes" paints a picture of a Mumbai apartment barely big enough to hold a bed and a stove—let alone the woman who lives there with her husband. While this lady is doing her best to live a good life, decorating with flowers and cooking delicious dal, her housing is working against her: she's jammed into a tiny, unforgiving, and even oppressive space. Such an uncomfortable life is increasingly the reality for many people in Mumbai, this poem suggests—and for people all over the world. Through this glimpse of one apartment, Chatterji suggests that cities keep getting denser at the expense of their citizens.

The woman this poem follows has a lot in common with the



LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-5

Her balcony bears ...

... in a jar.

“Boxes” begins with an image of an orchid on a balcony. The speaker describes how it got there: an unnamed “she,” the woman this poem will follow, “smuggled” this orchid back to her home from Singapore in a duffle bag. This sounds like an uncomfortable beginning for a flower, and things don’t seem to have gotten much easier for it since. The orchid’s “roots cling to air,” the speaker observes; its pot might be a little too small, and it’s overflowing.

It’s also suffering under the “harsh October sun”—a detail that helps readers to gather this poem takes place somewhere very hot, as October sunlight is pretty gentle in many parts of the world. (Later, the speaker will reveal that the poem is set in Mumbai, one of the biggest cities in India—and in the world.) Only for “two hours / every morning” is the sun “tender,” or gentle, on the orchid’s leaves. The rest of the time, readers gather, this poor orchid in its too-small pot is sizzling on that balcony.

In all of these details, this orchid becomes a [symbol](#) for its owner. For, as the speaker reveals, the woman is also trapped in a too-small, too-hot space. Her apartment is only “nine steps” wide “from door to balcony,” and inside it she feels like a “giant insect fretting in a jar.” If she’s a bug in a jar, readers might wonder: who or what trapped her there?

That bleak [metaphor](#) sets this poem’s tone. “Boxes” will be about a person trying to live her life while crammed into an apartment that might as well be a box or a bug-jar. Like her decorative orchid, she’ll do her best to bloom here, but her circumstances will make it difficult.

The poem’s shape will mirror the woman’s predicament. Though it’s written in [free verse](#) (without a regular [meter](#) or [rhyme scheme](#)), the poem uses a rigid form: quintains (or five-line stanzas) whose lines are all the same length. The poem ends up looking like the apartment building it describes, with narrow, rectangular “rooms” stacked on top of each other.

LINES 6-10

*On one side ...
... threatening to fall.*

The speaker now looks from the balcony where the orchid sits to the inside of the apartment, a “one-room home” that only just has space to fit a bed and a stove. On that stove, the woman is busy cooking dinner. The [enjambment](#) here suggests just how difficult that process feels:

On one side of her one-room home, a stove, where
she
cooks dal in an iron pan. [...]

That line break doesn’t fall at a natural pause but rather right in the middle of an idea. This creates an awkward rhythm that

might evoke the feeling of whacking your elbow on a kitchen cabinet every time you reach for the salt. Similar uncomfortable enjambments reappear all through the poem, reflecting the inconvenience and interruptions of life in a cramped space.

Impeded by the lack of space, this woman is nevertheless cooking up a pot of dal (a lentil dish)—and, as the speaker observes, “the smell of food is good.” That simple, direct line suggests that there’s something homey, earthy, and comforting about the smell of dal filling the tiny flat. Like the blooming orchid, this woman is doing her best to live a good life with good food even in this way-too-small space.

Still, this room just isn’t comfortable. Through the “window bars” (itself a detail that makes the room feel like a prison), the woman can hear the “sing-song of voices” all day long, sounds that travel in “steady arcs.” The [imagery](#) of the voices making an “arc[.]” shape turns sound into something solid, suggesting that the noise of people outside is almost a physical presence, barring the woman into her room as much as the literal window bars do. At the same time, this image of arcs of sound brings to mind the way the voices of people chatting outside tend to come in and out of focus when you’re inside, allowing you to catch only glimpses of a full conversation.

And there’s yet more stuff inside the room cluttering it up, too. Next to a “giant stack of quilts, threatening to fall,” there sits “a husband,” listed alongside the furnishings as if he were just another object getting in the way. He seems to know he’s in the way, too: he sits “with his back to the wall,” obviously trying to make room for his wife to cook dinner. This slightly funny, slightly sad moment suggests that part of the struggle of living in a space that’s just too small is feeling like you’re always being irritated and impeded by the people you live with—even if you love them.

LINES 11-15

*Sleeping room only, ...
... on a dump.*

This apartment, the speaker says, should have been labeled “sleeping room only” with a “note on the door,” warning the people moving in that they should be prepared for “cramp.” That word equally suggests cramped conditions and literal cramped muscles. In a room where there’s barely space to turn around, the inhabitants might genuinely cramp up trying to wedge themselves in.

Certainly this isn’t a great place to relax. You can’t even walk into this room with dignity, the speaker says (with a touch of [hyperbole](#)): the best you can do is “fall in and kick off your shoes,” landing in the bed that takes up most of the space the second you’re through the door, trying not to get it muddy.

The idea that a “note on the door” should have warned the couple about what they were getting into reminds readers that someone out there must be the landlord. Someone has decided

that this “corridor with a bed” is a reasonable place for two people to live. But that someone remains invisible in this poem, called out only indirectly. The person who *owns* this building—and who should have had the shame to leave that note on the door—almost certainly isn’t living like this.

The world around this tiny flat feels just as claustrophobic as the space within it:

- Looking outside again, the speaker sees trains “mak[ing] tracks / to unfamiliar sounding places”—roaring past on their way to spots where the couple that lives in this flat might never go. That mention of “unfamiliar sounding places” makes the couple feel all the more stuck where they are. Though the woman made it to Singapore for long enough to smuggle her orchid home, it doesn’t sound like this pair are able to get out a lot.
- Looking the other way, the speaker sees a quite different sight: “two giant black pigs” which lie in a heap of trash, either “dead, or asleep.” This grotesque, funny image forms a striking [juxtaposition](#) with those roaring trains. The world this woman lives in combines the racket of urban transit with the earthy sight of pigs passed out in garbage. (Both of these moments of [imagery](#) might also invite readers to imagine *smells*.)

While the pigs are a comical sight, this is also a pretty gross thing to have to look at all the time. Strong /d/ and /p/ [alliteration](#) and [consonance](#) in the description of the pigs—“two giant black pigs lie dead, or asleep, on a dump”—evokes the grotesque hugeness of those piggy bodies in that dump, inviting readers to worry about what might happen if those pigs *are* dead. A pair of huge rotting pig carcasses outside the window is no one’s idea of a scenic view.

These sights are “unhidden by [the woman’s] curtains,” the speaker observes. The apartment is thus too enclosed and too public at the same time. It’s claustrophobically tiny, but it also can’t keep out the wider world, with all its often unsavory sights and smells.

LINES 16-20

*Every day the ...
... out the light.*

In the poem’s final stanza, the speaker zooms out, looking over the whole city of Mumbai and seeing it as a cruel giant. An [internal rhyme](#) here underscores the nonsensical injustice of the city’s growth:

Every day the city grows **taller**, trampling underfoot
students wives lovers babies. The boxes grow
smaller.

The city gets bigger, but the apartments only shrink. This city isn’t a society made by and for its citizens, then, but a separate, cruel entity that “tramp[es]” the people who live in it. The [asyndeton](#) here—“students wives lovers babies” all in a row, with no punctuation or conjunctions—evokes the city’s indifference, mashing all these vulnerable people together in a lump.

As the city grows, it begins to affect the world around it, too. Once, the speaker says, the sea off the coast of Mumbai was a “siren to seven islands”: in other words, a mermaid singing to the seven islands on which Mumbai was built. (Those islands got merged into one big landmass in the 19th century.) This is a complex, ambivalent [metaphor](#):

- A siren is a dangerous mythological figure, but the word also suggests beauty and yearning: sirens were said to lure sailors to their deaths with lovely songs.
- The sea around Mumbai, then, was once both a force to be reckoned with and a source of beauty. (Even the [assonance](#) and [sibilance](#) of “siren to seven islands” hints at haunting music.)
- But now, tall buildings block out the ocean so that it’s only a “distant memory.”

In the poem’s final image, the sky over Mumbai is a giant to match the city. It “strides” on “giant stilts”—perhaps an image of Mumbai’s tall buildings—“blocking out the light” as it goes. The image of the sky marching across the city and *blocking* light (rather than being a source of light) might suggest the way that city lights can blot out the stars.

These final images present the city as a monster that creates monsters. This Mumbai is a cruel beast; the bigger it grows, the more it traps and oppresses people in tiny “boxes.”

The woman’s sturdy efforts to make a life in one of these boxes, cooking dinner and watering her struggling orchid, suggests that people will go on trying to live their lives even as their societies make those lives harder and harder. But the poem’s eerie closing images warn that cities that get bigger for their own sakes, without concern for their citizens’ quality of life or the natural world around them, become tyrannical and inhumane.



SYMBOLS



THE ORCHID

The orchid on the woman’s balcony seems to have a lot in common with the woman herself. As it makes a tenuous place for itself in a too-hot, too-cramped space, it becomes a [symbol](#) for the woman—and for anyone trying to make a home in awkward and restrictive housing.

"Smuggled in a duffle bag" all the way from Singapore to Mumbai, this orchid has been dealing with cramped spaces for some time. Now, its "roots cling to air," spilling over the edge of a pot it's outgrowing. For most of the day, it suffers beneath the "harsh October sun"; only for "two hours / every morning" is that sun gentle enough to feel pleasant on its leaves.

In all of these qualities, the orchid mirrors its owner. Like the orchid, the woman the poem describes doesn't have enough space: she, too, is trapped in a tiny box in the glare of the harsh sun. And like the orchid, she's doing her best to *bloom*, to live her life (and make it beautiful) in the space she's been given. The orchid's predicament thus feels especially poignant, suggesting that people keep on trying to live good lives even as their circumstances fight against them.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-4:** "Her balcony bears an orchid smuggled in a duffle bag / from Singapore. Its roots cling to air. For two hours / every morning the harsh October sun turns tender / at its leaves."

constant chatter doesn't sound exactly unpleasant; the word "sing-song" even suggests it might be almost musical. But if the chatter moves in "steady arcs," it's also relentless. The [metaphor](#) of those physical "arcs" suggests that the sound of people talking forms a kind of cage around the room, just like the literal window bars.

If the residents glance out their window, meanwhile, they'll see this charming sight: "two giant black pigs [lying] dead, or asleep, on a dump." Besides presenting the comical image of massive pigs sleeping like the dead in a pile of trash, this moment invites readers to reach a little further and imagine what this sight might *smell* like. Not too good, probably. In this tiny flat, all the inhabitants' senses are getting assaulted; there's no relief to be found.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "Its roots cling to air."
- **Lines 3-4:** "the harsh October sun turns tender / at its leaves"
- **Lines 8-9:** "Through the window bars the sing-song of voices high / then low in steady arcs."
- **Line 15:** "two giant black pigs lie dead, or asleep, on a dump"



POETIC DEVICES

IMAGERY

Most of "Boxes" takes place in a few square feet: a "one-room" apartment with a stove, a bed, and two people jammed into it. The poem's [imagery](#) helps readers to feel the limits of this room, sharing in its inhabitants' claustrophobia. But it also captures flickers of beauty, a reminder that people forced to live in awkward, hostile spaces yearn for better things.

That mood might be clearest in the first stanza, where the speaker describes an orchid that the woman who lives in this tiny flat keeps on her balcony. This orchid, like its owner, seems to be just barely hanging on. "Its roots cling to air," the speaker says, an image that suggests the orchid is trying to get a toehold in an element that can't really support it: its roots are outgrowing its pot.

The balcony clearly isn't the most comfortable place for it, either. Only for a couple of hours in the morning does the "harsh October sun turn[] tender / at its leaves"; the rest of the time, the sun must just scorch the orchid. Here, the orchid's experience helps readers to imagine the *residents'* experience. They, too, are stuck in a tiny spot with the "harsh October sun" of Mumbai blazing in on them. And they, too, might only get a couple of hours a day of relative comfort.

They're constrained not only by the walls of their little flat but also by the sounds and sights of the outside world pressing in. Through their "window bars" (in itself a detail that suggests their room feels like a prison), they can constantly hear the "sing-song of voices high / then low in steady arcs." This

METAPHOR

The poem's [metaphors](#) bring the tiny box of an apartment (and the feelings of the people who live in such apartments) to vivid life. In the first stanza, for instance, the speaker describes the woman the poem follows as a "giant insect fretting in a jar," a metaphor that suggests she feels both cramped and *dehumanized* by her surroundings. This image also implies that someone or something has trapped her in the "jar" of this minuscule flat, the way a kid might trap a bug—and thus invites readers to think about why it is, exactly, that people end up living in such cramped and frustrating spaces.

Another metaphor suggests that this bug-jar of an apartment feels oppressive for more than one reason. "Through the window bars," the speaker says, you can hear "the sing-song of voices high / then low in steady arcs." By presenting the voices of neighbors and passers-by as solid objects that can fly in "arcs," the speaker gets at what it feels like to be boxed in by *sound* as well as walls. Those arcing voices might even echo the "window bars," forming a cage of sound around the flat.

The poem closes with a series of menacing [personifications](#):

- First, the speaker imagines Mumbai as a giant, "grow[ing] taller" by the day and "trampling underfoot" its vulnerable citizens: "students wives lovers babies" are all crushed by the city's growth. This metaphor suggests that the city is something *other* than the people who are trying to make their

lives in it. It has its own purposes, and those purposes aren't humane.

- The city's growth also blocks out the "sea," which was, the speaker remembers, once the "siren to seven islands." In other words, it used to sing like a mermaid to the seven interconnected islands that make up the landmass of Mumbai. In this image, the sea is dangerous: sirens are mythological creatures who lure sailors to their deaths. But it's also romantic, with the power to inspire yearning. Or at least, it *was* romantic, before high-rise buildings blocked it from view.
- Finally, the speaker pictures the sky "strid[ing] / inland on giant stilts," "shutting out the light." The "giant stilts" here suggest skyscrapers—an image that gets at the way city lights make the night sky opaque for miles around, blocking the stars. Here, the sky becomes a striding giant to match the giant of the city. The two of them together menace and oppress the people at their feet.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "she is a giant insect fretting in a jar"
- **Lines 8-9:** "the sing-song of voices high / then low in steady arcs"
- **Lines 16-17:** "the city grows taller, trampling underfoot / students wives lovers babies"
- **Lines 18-19:** "The sea becomes a distant memory of lashing wave / and neon, siren to seven islands, once"
- **Lines 19-20:** "The sky strides / inland on giant stilts"

ALLITERATION

The language of "Boxes" is rich with [alliteration](#) (and with other sonic devices like [assonance](#), [consonance](#), and [sibilance](#)). The music these devices provide helps to keep the poem from feeling too dismal, creating flashes of life and beauty even as the poem describes difficult and frustrating circumstances.

The speaker's description of the woman's cramped discomfort provides a good example:

[...] Nine steps from door to balcony and
already she is a giant insect fretting in a jar.

The /juh/ sounds here—supported by the /eh/ assonance of "steps," "already," and "insect fretting"—highlight a funny-but-uncomfortable image. It's not fun to feel like a trapped bug, but the jaunty echoing sounds make the woman's frustration feel a little lighter than it otherwise might. She's not comfortable, but she's also not defeated.

There's a similar effect in line 15:

two giant black pigs lie dead, or asleep, on a dump.

The thudding /d/ sound here evokes the dead weight of those massive pigs. And again, the alliteration shines a spotlight on an image that's as darkly comic as it's uncomfortable. A view of pigs sleeping (or lying dead) in a trash heap feels like an almost absurd cherry on top of the woman's situation: not only does she not have any room to turn around in, but her only view is of dozing swine.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "balcony bears," "bag"
- **Line 3:** "turns tender"
- **Line 5:** "giant," "jar"
- **Line 13:** "trains," "tracks"
- **Line 15:** "dead," "dump"
- **Line 16:** "taller, trampling"
- **Line 19:** "siren," "seven," "sky strides"
- **Line 20:** "stilts"

ENJAMBMENT

[Enjambments](#) help this poem's form to match its subject matter. Sudden, awkward line breaks evoke the feeling of not quite having enough room to maneuver in—and shape the stanzas so that they look as narrow and constrained as the rooms they describe.

"Stanza" is Italian for "room" (a fact that many poets have [made much of](#)), and these stanzas match the "one-room home" the poem describes: enjambments help to keep them long, narrow, and rectangular, truncating sentences as abruptly as if they'd hit walls. The first stanza, for example, is enjambed throughout:

Her balcony bears an orchid smuggled in a duffle bag
from Singapore. Its roots cling to air. For two hours
every morning the harsh October sun turns tender
at its leaves. Nine steps from door to balcony and
already she is a giant insect fretting in a jar.

Every one of these line breaks falls in an uncomfortable spot. These aren't places where you'd take a natural pause in speech. Rather than breaking lines at harmonious places, Chattarji picks a line length and cuts the lines off when they reach that length. The effect suggests that the body isn't the only thing that can feel cramped and awkward in a tiny living space: thoughts and feelings get squashed and severed, too. It makes perfect sense when the speaker concludes that the lady living in this room (and this stanza!) feels as trapped as a "giant insect fretting in a jar."

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "bag / from"
- **Lines 2-3:** "hours / every"
- **Lines 3-4:** "tender / at"

- **Lines 4-5:** "and / already"
- **Lines 6-7:** "she / cooks"
- **Lines 8-9:** "high / then lo"
- **Lines 13-14:** "tracks / to"
- **Lines 16-17:** "underfoot / students"
- **Lines 18-19:** "wave / and"
- **Lines 19-20:** "strides / inland"



VOCABULARY

Fretting (Line 5) - Worrying. The woman is a bug trapped in a jar, in this [metaphor](#), anxiously buzzing between the walls of her cramped home.

Dal (Lines 6-7) - A traditional lentil dish.

Arcs (Lines 8-9) - Arching shapes. The word suggests the way these voices come in and out focus, and it might also suggest that these voices are almost a physical presence in the poem; much like the literal "window bars," perhaps these soaring voices make the woman feel even more hemmed in.

Readying you for cramp (Line 12) - That is, warning or preparing you for the fact that this space is cramped—and may result in painful cramped limbs!

Siren (Line 19) - A mythological mermaid-like creature known for luring sailors to their deaths with beautiful singing.



FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Boxes" is written in [free verse](#) and thus doesn't use a traditional form (like the [sonnet](#) or the [villanelle](#)), a [meter](#), or a [rhyme scheme](#). Its stanzas do, however, take on a meaningful shape. Chattarji carefully measures out the poem's lines so that they're all about the same length. Each of the poem's four quintains (or five-line stanzas) looks almost identical on the page, narrow and rectangular. That shape that mirrors the cramped, awkward "corridor" of a room the poem's protagonist does her best to make a home in. (The comparison feels especially apt because the word "stanza" means "room" in Italian. [Plenty of poets](#) play with that [pun](#)!)

The four of these regular stanzas piled on top of each other thus end up looking a lot like the Mumbai apartment building this poem describes, with tiny, narrow one-room flats stacked up high. Within that narrow form, Chattarji makes room for a lot of colorful description and homey detail (like the smell of lentil curry cooking and the sight of an orchid blooming on the balcony). The poem's copious [imagery](#), packed into little spaces, also mirrors what the poem describes: people doing their best to live their lives, even in awkward and unforgiving spaces.

METER

There's no regular [meter](#) in this [free verse](#) poem. Chattarji creates the poem's rhythms through other means. For example, take a look at the way lines 6-7 use an [enjambment](#), a [caesura](#), and an [end-stopped line](#) to capture the atmosphere in the woman's tiny, cramped apartment:

On one side of her one-room home, a stove, where
she
cooks dal in an iron pan. || The smell of food is good.

The enjambment between "she" and "cooks" falls in an awkward spot, somewhere you'd never introduce a break or a pause in ordinary speech. That awkwardness in the rhythm reflects the awkwardness of trying to cook in a "one-room home" with barely space to turn around. The sentence gets out of bounds, like used cooking utensils overwhelming a tiny counter.

But the caesura midway through line 7—and the end-stop that brings the line to a close—allows this description to end with a more comforting tone. "The smell of food is good," the speaker declares: a short sentence in simple words that comes to a firm stop. That simplicity feels earthy and comfortable, suggesting that the people living in this tiny, inconvenient flat are still managing to make a home for themselves.

The changing rhythms here thus help to conjure up the poem's emotional atmosphere, in which a couple tries to build a comfortable life in deeply uncomfortable circumstances.

RHYME SCHEME

There's no regular [rhyme scheme](#) in this [free verse](#) poem. However, Chattarji fills the poem with [internal rhyme](#), near rhyme, [slant rhyme](#), and even an occasional end rhyme, making the language feel perky, alert, and colorful. For instance, take lines 8-10:

Through the window bars the sing-song of voices
high
then low in steady arcs. With his back to the wall,
a husband, and a giant stack of quilts, threatening to
fall.

Here, a hard repeated /ar/ sound connects "bars" and "arcs," perhaps helping to evoke how boxed-in the little room feels: the window bars and the constant sounds of neighbors' voices take on the same sounds. The end rhyme between "wall" and "fall," meanwhile, stands out: it's the only end rhyme in the poem, and it helps to highlight the comic image of the husband and the stack of quilts as just two awkward obstacles cluttering up this woman's tiny room.

In lines 16-17, meanwhile, an internal rhyme helps to suggest the way that cities oppress their residents with tiny, inadequate

living spaces:

Every day the city grows taller, trampling underfoot
students wives lovers babies. The boxes grow
smaller.

The bigger the city gets, the smaller the apartments get—and the internal rhyme here underscores that oppressive reality.



SPEAKER

The speaker in this poem is an omniscient onlooker, an observer peeking in on a woman and her husband living in a tiny Mumbai flat. Perhaps, however, this onlooker has something in common with the woman, who stands at the stove cooking dal. The speaker mostly sticks to the woman's perspective and feelings, noting that she feels like a "giant insect fretting in a jar" in this tiny space—and only mentioning her husband in passing, listing him right next to a "stack of quilts," as if he were just another piece of clutter getting in the woman's way. This humorous dismissiveness helps to capture the woman's frustration with trying to live a life (and get dinner on the table) in a space this small and awkward.

However, the speaker does pull away from the woman's perspective toward the end of the poem. In the final stanza, they take a bird's-eye view of the city where this couple lives, watching while the "city grows taller" and the "boxes" in which people are expected to live "grow smaller." While these ideas might also be read as the woman's thoughts and reflections on the city where she lives, they also feel like a grander pronouncement on an increasingly inhumane urban landscape.



SETTING

Sampurna Chattarji has lived in India for most of her life, and this poem is set there. The mention of dal (a lentil dish) cooking on the stove, the [juxtaposition](#) of urban trains with livestock (those "giant black pigs" sleeping on a dump out back), and the reference to a quick trip to Singapore all help readers to figure out where this particular tiny apartment might be.

More specifically, the reference to the city's sprawl, the nearby ocean, and the "seven islands" that make up its terrain all suggest the poem is set in Mumbai, the coastal city that is one of the biggest in India—and in the world, for that matter. (Mumbai was originally seven islands, but got combined into one landmass by British colonizers in the 19th century.)

More specifically yet, the poem is set in a minuscule apartment, only "[n]ine steps" wide from "door to balcony." Inside this cramped space, a woman is trying to cook dinner while her husband sits with his "back to the wall," trying his best to stay out of her way. That's no easy feat in circumstances this

cramped and awkward. While this couple are doing their best to make a home, they're truly boxed in: by the walls of their tiny flat, the noises of their neighbors, and the unlikelihood they'll be able to find any better lodgings than these.

The circumstances the speaker describes—cities getting bigger and bigger while the "boxes" people are confined to only get smaller—are truths worldwide. This poem quietly criticizes an inhumane housing market at the same time as it paints a sympathetic picture of one couple at home.



CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Sampurna Chattarji (1970-present) is an Indian poet, translator, and children's author. She was born in Ethiopia, where her parents had been working as teachers. But when she was only eight months old, her family moved back to India. She has since lived in Calcutta, Darjeeling, New Delhi, and Mumbai. This poem's portrait of housing in Mumbai comes from her direct experience of that vast city.

"Boxes" appeared in her first collection of poetry, *Sight May Strike You Blind* (2007). While Chattarji is multilingual, she mostly writes her poetry in English. Of the role of English vs. Bangla in her work, [she has said](#):

My school years were dominated by English (the medium of instruction and my chosen language for dreaming, writing, reading), with Bangla playing out a parallel soundtrack at home [...]. I read and was read to in English, but I imbibed Bangla through conversation, recitation of poems by parents, recordings of my grandparents singing, my brother reciting Sukumar Ray in a solemn voice. [...] When I think back to those years, I don't recall the *sound* of English. I recall the Bangla-sound which seems to surround an English that was inside me as natural (and unnoticed) as breath.

Chattarji's artistic influences are likewise multilingual and cross-cultural: she names the American poet [Louise Glück](#) and Indian children's author Sukumar Ray as some of her favorite writers.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"Boxes" paints a realistic picture of cramped, inadequate housing in Mumbai in the early 21st century. Chattarji (who lives in Thane, just outside Mumbai) depicts a world she knows here: one of the world's biggest cities, and one that's growing rapidly.

Modern India is seeing a major population shift. As the country's economy evolves, rural people are moving into the

cities, and those cities are getting taller and denser all the time. As this poem observes, such rapid change has a serious effect on the way people live. Developers build apartments smaller and smaller and skyscrapers taller and taller, trying to cram as many people into their buildings as possible.

This poem's depiction of one flat in Mumbai isn't just about life in India, either. Increasingly, this is a portrait of life all over the globe in ever-expanding cities.

- [An Interview with Chattarji](https://www.lit-across-frontiers.org/profiles/sampurna-chattarji/) — Read an interview with Chattarji in which she discusses the influence of her multilingualism on her work. (<https://www.lit-across-frontiers.org/profiles/sampurna-chattarji/>)
- [Sight May Strike You Blind](https://sampurnachattarji.wordpress.com/sight-may-strike-you-blind/) — Learn more about the collection this poem comes from on Chattarji's personal website. (<https://sampurnachattarji.wordpress.com/sight-may-strike-you-blind/>)



MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- [Chattarji's Life and Work](https://www.lit-across-frontiers.org/profiles/sampurna-chattarji/) — Read a short biography of Chattarji to learn more about her life and poetry. (<https://www.lit-across-frontiers.org/profiles/sampurna-chattarji/>)
- [Chattarji on Poetry](https://youtu.be/7QKTd71es9I?si=vyR3gQy5OkjO5pa0) — Watch a short video in which Chattarji discusses writing poetry for children. (<https://youtu.be/7QKTd71es9I?si=vyR3gQy5OkjO5pa0>)



HOW TO CITE

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