

# Father Returning Home



## SUMMARY

The speaker's father takes the late-night train, becoming one of many people who stand in silence under the train's yellow lights as they head home from work in the city. He doesn't notice the suburbs that pass by outside the train's windows. His clothing is wet and muddy from the rain and his heavy bookbag is worn out. His weary, aging eyes absently gaze out through the hot, sticky night in the general direction of home. The speaker envisions his anticlimactic exit from the train, followed by his rushing across the dingy train platform and over the tracks until he reaches the little road where their house is. He rushes ahead despite the fact that his leather sandals are by now covered with mud. Once he's finally home, he eats a sad little dinner and reads. Then he heads to the bathroom, where he ponders how alienated he feels from the world humanity has created for itself. His body is shaking as he emerges from the bathroom and then washes his brown, aging hands in cold water at the sink. His moody kids barely interact with him. He falls asleep to the white noise coming from the radio, dreaming about both past and future generations of his family, as well as about the ancient nomadic peoples who traveled across a mountain pass into India.

hours doesn't improve his material circumstances all that much (that is, he can't afford to fix the bag).

The poem also presents the father as just one of many "silent commuters" undertaking this draining trip from the city into the suburbs. These people aren't commiserating about their shared circumstances nor, it seems, even acknowledging one another's presence. Indeed, the father eventually exits the train "Like a word dropped from a long sentence." By this, the speaker means that his absence is barely noticeable; the world swiftly moves on without him. The pace and breadth of modern life, this image suggests, devalues the individual.

The father's dejection doesn't abate once he steps off the train, either. Back at home, he "contemplate[s] / Man's estrangement from a man-made world," implying that the disconnection he feels from everything around him is a symptom of the times he lives in. Instead of *improving* life, the father believes that modern technologies and innovations have pushed people apart and robbed them of a true sense of purpose. That he falls asleep "Listening to the static on the radio" further reflects the listlessness he feels: a radio is normally used for communication or entertainment, but the father is tuning in to white noise—to random, meaningless "static."

He finds respite only in his dream of "ancestors and grandchildren," hammering home the idea that modernity has alienated him from all sense of who he is or where he belongs. In his dreams, he's connected to a lineage of people: to "ancestors" who came before him and "grandchildren" who will follow. Such dreams convey his longing to feel like he's part of something. Modernity, the poem suggests, has robbed him of the sense that his life matters.



## THEMES



### THE ALIENATION AND RESTLESSNESS OF MODERN LIFE

"Father Returning Home" describes the speaker's aging father heading home from work in the city. His lonely, tiring commute on a late-night train surrounded by other "silent" passengers suggests that the modern world is an isolating, disheartening place. What's more, arriving home is no relief: the father seems alone and dejected even in his own house, among his own children. All in all, the father's "estrangement" from his environment and other people reflects the alienation and restlessness of modern life, something the poem implies can leave people feeling cut off from any sense of meaning or belonging.

The father's journey home sounds both exhausting and demoralizing. The fact that he's taking "the late evening train" suggests that he still works long hours despite getting on in years, while the mention of his "unseeing" eyes conveys that he's either too tired to notice his surroundings or he just no longer cares enough to pay attention. That his "bag stuffed with books / Is falling apart" further hints at his weariness (he's too tired to mend or replace his bag) and/or that working long

#### Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-6
- Lines 13-19
- Lines 21-24



### FAMILY, LEGACY, AND INTERGENERATIONAL CONFLICT

The titular father of "Father Returning Home" finds little comfort upon reaching home after a long day at work. He has a dismal dinner of "stale chapati" and "weak tea," hinting that no one has saved or prepared anything for him, and his "sullen children" barely speak to him. Though he presumably spends all day providing for his family and trying to give them a better life, the poem hints that a stark generational divide distances this father from his children. The now-grown speaker looks back on all this with clear pity and compassion, illustrating

how children often fail to appreciate their parents' sacrifices—and the importance of recognizing where they come from—until they're adults themselves.

Perhaps because they don't think he'd appreciate or even understand their humor, the father's children "refuse[] to share / Jokes" with him. They also don't tell him "secrets," keeping their world separate from his. They don't trust their father, it seems, at least not with their humor or their hearts.

It's clear that their father, meanwhile, longs to feel a sense of belonging and connection, as he drifts off to sleep "dreaming / of his ancestors and grandchildren." He envisions generations both the past and the future, reflecting the importance he places on being part of a continuous family lineage. The mention of grandchildren further suggests that he's wondering what his *own* legacy will be—how he will be remembered by the generations to come.

Notably, the poem implies that the speaker (implied to be based on Chitre himself) is telling this story about his father from an adult perspective; he mentions his father's "sullen children" as though he weren't one of them, suggesting that he has since grown up and is now looking back on the past. The attention he pays to his father's weariness, shoddy clothing, and aging body conveys the speaker's present empathy for his father. As an adult, he seems more able to imagine and appreciate the difficulties his father faced in providing for a family who wasn't always grateful or even aware of his sacrifices. Now, this poem is essentially his way of connecting with his *own* ancestors and honoring his father's legacy.

#### Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 8-9
- Lines 13-14
- Lines 20-24



### FATHERHOOD AND MASCULINITY

In addition to reflecting the alienation of modern life, "Father Returning Home" can also be read as a meditation on the traditional demands of fatherhood. (Recall that the poem was inspired by Chitre's own memories of his father in the 1950s, a time when, by and large, men were expected to go out and work while women stayed home with the children.) The speaker's father clearly feels disconnected from the children he works all day to provide for, yet who "refuse[] to share / Jokes and secrets with him." The poem hints that this distance is, at least in part, a result of societal expectations that push men to spend their time away from the home, providing for their families rather than spending time with them.

The speaker pictures the father "hurrying" to get home, suggesting that being with his family is important to him. On

the train, his "eyes [...] / fade homeward"; he's not paying attention to the scenery he's passing through, the poem implies, because he's thinking about getting back to his family. And once the train stops, he "hurries across the length of the grey platform" and "hurries onward" despite his muddy shoes.

Yet when he does finally make it home, he's greeted by yet more solitude and silence. Rather than eating a meal with his family, the father drinks "weak tea" and eats old "chapati" (an Indian flatbread). Rather than speaking to anyone, he "read[s]" and sits in the bathroom "contemplate[ing]" his own separation from the world. He even feels cut off from his own children, who "refuse[] to share / Jokes and secrets with him." He's not really a part of their world; they seem to view him as a serious, dismal outsider.

The poem suggests that the father's disconnection from his family is a direct result of "Man's estrangement from the man-made world." While "man" refers to humanity in general, it also suggests the particular ways that men suffer in a world where they are conditioned to be the breadwinners for families they always don't get to know.

#### Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 6-7
- Lines 10-16
- Lines 20-21
- Lines 22-23



## LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

### LINES 1-3

*My father travels ...  
... his unseeing eyes*

"Father Returning Home" begins with the speaker describing his father's commute from work in the city "on the late evening train." The speaker describes his father in the present tense, as though he's right there with him; the poem will later imply that the speaker is in fact imagining this scene later in life.

Right away, the poem's [imagery](#) conveys just how dismal and tiresome the father's commute is. The fact that he takes the "late" train suggests that he works long hours or an inconvenient late shift. The train itself is dreary, filled with other "silent commuters" who don't interact as they stand under the artificial "yellow light." These people just want to get home, the poem hints, and don't have the energy or desire to connect with other passengers.

The train moves from the city through "suburbs," which "slide past" the train's windows and the father's "unseeing eyes." He is not literally blind; instead, this [metaphorical](#) description of his eyes further conveys his weariness. He has no interest in those

suburbs, which he likely commutes past nearly every day. There's nothing new or exciting about this experience, and the poem hints that he's too worn out from work to care about his surroundings.

The sounds of the poem in these lines add to its somber tone. Sibilance in particular ("Standing," "silent," "Suburbs slide past his unseeing eyes") conjures the hush of the people inside the train. These lines also establish that the poem will be written in [free verse](#). The absence of [meter](#) and [rhyme](#) makes the poem feel casual and perhaps even ordinary, fitting for the very ordinary scene the speaker is describing.

### LINES 4-7

*His shirt and ...  
... humid monsoon night.*

These lines zoom in on the father's rundown appearance. His clothes are "soggy" and his rainjacket is "Stained with mud"; apparently it's raining outside, adding yet more gloom to the poem's atmosphere. He carries a "bag stuffed with books," which hints at the nature of his work: readers can guess that he does something related to research, academia, or writing. (Chitre's own father published a periodical.) This bag is "falling apart," however. The father's wet, crumpled clothes and his disintegrating bag convey his dejection and discomfort.

Listen, too, to the [parallelism](#) of these phrases:

- "his black raincoat / Stained with mud"
- "his bag stuff with books"
- "His eyes dimmed by age"

Each description follows the same formula, creating a repetitive, monotonous rhythm that helps to relay the father's downtrodden state. [Polysyndeton](#) adds to the effect, the repeated "ands" in lines 4-5 making all these wearying clauses seem to pile up and up:

His shirt and pants are soggy **and** his black raincoat  
Stained with mud **and** his bag stuffed with books

The heaving /b/ [alliteration](#) and long /ay/ [assonance](#) of these lines make them feel weightier still:

His shirt and pants are soggy and his **black** raincoat  
Stained with mud and his **bag** stuffed with **books**  
Is falling apart. His eyes dimmed by age  
fade [...]

Readers can sense that this man likely just wants to get home and out of these damp clothes.

The fact that the father's eyes are "dimmed by age" further illustrates that this is no young man excited by the prospect of a new career and adventures in the city. He is old and tired, and

the fact that his eyes "fade homeward" rather than, say, "light up" suggests that nothing particularly welcoming or exciting awaits him at the end of his commute. His longing to get home seems based primarily on exhaustion and a desire to escape the unpleasant weather brought on by the "monsoon night" ("monsoon" season in India is a time marked by sticky heat and heavy rain).

### LINES 8-12

*Now I can ...  
... he hurries onward.*

Next, the speaker says he "can see [his father] getting off the train / Like a word dropped from a long sentence." Again, the speaker isn't literally by his father's side. He's *imagining* his father's commute, presumably now as an adult himself.

The evocative [simile](#) in these lines illustrates that no one really notices or cares about the father's exit from the train. His absence has no effect on the train's journey, just as cutting a single word from an already "long sentence" usually doesn't change its meaning. This, in turn, might reflect the way modernity tends to render regular people inconsequential. The father's absence is quickly forgotten as the train hurries on; the modern world moves too fast to notice an ordinary person like him.

Once he's off the train, the father "hurries across the length of the gray platform." The color of this platform evokes both the ugliness of the train station itself and the blandness of the father's routine; he takes this same route home each and every day, and he has no interest in stopping and looking around him.

Notice the [parallelism](#) of "Crosses the railway line, enters the lane." Again, the poem uses grammatically identical phrasing to convey the relentless monotony of the father's journey home. The [asyndeton](#) here (the lack of a coordinating conjunction between these clauses) suggests the swift, mindless, even robotic nature of these actions. The father doesn't have to think about what he's doing because he presumably does it nearly every day.

His "chappals" (a kind of leather sandal common in India) "are sticky with mud," an image further conveying the father's discomfort as he "hurries home." Nothing about this "return" seems pleasant.

### LINES 13-16

*Home again, I ...  
... a man-made world.*

The father finally reaches home exactly halfway through the poem. Yet despite his journey coming to an end, being home doesn't seem to provide him with much comfort or relief. He's "Home again," out of the mud and rain, but this home doesn't seem all that welcoming.

The speaker describes his father's actions in the present tense,

saying, "I see him." Once again, the implication is really that the speaker is now an adult and looking back on these moments (moments, perhaps, that he didn't pay any attention to when he was still a child). He envisions his father "drinking weak tea, / Eating a stale chapati [a kind of Indian flatbread], reading a book."

This list features yet more [parallelism](#) and [asyndeton](#), which combine to evoke the monotony and mindlessness of these actions. This list of activities isn't all-inclusive, either; they're just meant to illustrate how utterly flavorless the father's life was. "Drinking weak tea" suggests he's too tired to really bother tasting what he's drinking, and "Eating a stale chapati" (an Indian flatbread) implies that he missed dinner and is just gnawing on whatever leftovers he can find (and also, perhaps, that no one bothered to save him anything).

Though he might sometimes be found "reading a book," at others times he goes and sits in the bathroom "to contemplate / man's estrangement" (or separation and alienation) "from the man-made world." He's deeply aware of how dismal his life is; he feels cut off from everything around him. "Man," by which the poem means humanity in general, is [ironically](#) isolated from the world human beings created for themselves. This line hints at the way that modern society—with its long commutes, office jobs, technology, and so on—can make people feel intensely insignificant and alone, estranged from themselves and from humanity in general.

### LINES 17-19

*Coming out he ...  
... on his wrists.*

The speaker zeros in on a more specific image of his father. After sitting in the bathroom thinking about how alienating the modern world is, he comes out and "trembles at the sink." This trembling evokes his age and weariness, and it also suggests that the speaker, looking back on this moment, feels tenderness and pity toward his father; he seems to now sense the frailty and vulnerability he probably wasn't aware of as a child. This awareness, in turn, might suggest something about where the speaker is at in his own life; perhaps he is now old enough to "tremble" at the sink, and to more clearly see his father as a person and not just as a parent.

The speaker adds that "cold water" runs over his father's "brown hands," and a "few droplets cling to the greying hairs on his wrists." The chill of the water echoes the loneliness and "estrangement" the father feels, while the mention of "greying hairs" reiterates that the father is aging. The fact that the poem zooms in on these minute details further suggests the speaker is looking as closely at this memory of his father as he can; there's something he's trying to understand about him that perhaps he's never thought to look for before.

### LINES 20-24

*His sullen children ...  
... a narrow pass.*

The speaker's father doesn't just feel "estranged" from society; he's also unable to connect with his own children, who "have often refused to share / Jokes and secrets with him." Calling these children "sullen" conveys that they're withdrawn, moody, and unresponsive. The father seems like an outsider in his own home. Perhaps this is because he is gone all day working to provide for the family and thus isn't really part of their world. (Note that there is no mention of a wife/mother in the poem, making the father's isolation feel even more profound.)

The father then concludes his day by falling asleep "Listening to the static on the radio." Radios are tools of communication and entertainment, but the father is just listening to white noise. The radio [symbolizes](#) the lack of meaning he perceives in his own life and his feelings of alienation from the "man-made world."

Only in sleep does the father find some respite from the monotony and loneliness of his waking life. He dreams "Of his ancestors and grandchildren" and "Of nomads entering a subcontinent through a narrow pass." In his dreams, he is part of a family lineage, connected to ancestors who lived before him and grandchildren who will live on after he's gone. The "pass" mentioned in the poem's final line likely refers to the Khyber Pass, which connects the Indian subcontinent with Central Asia and has been used for centuries as a trading route. In sleep, he is not lost in a sea of meaningless "static" but part of something real and lasting, the deep history not just of his family but of India and its people.

The poem's final lines ("His sullen [...] narrow pass.") are all [enjambéd](#), allowing the poem to unfurl smoothly and swiftly down the page. The poem's form evokes the pull of sleep as the father drifts off as well as the fluid connection between himself and generations past and present; there's no firm pause to separate the father from his "ancestors," "grandchildren," or those "nomads."



## SYMBOLS



### STATIC

At the end of the poem, the father falls asleep while "Listening to the static on the radio." This static [symbolizes](#) the lack of purpose and connection in the speaker's life and in the modern world in general. While radios are typically used for communication (i.e., the news) or entertainment (sports games, music, etc.), the father's radio isn't actually emitting anything meaningful. Instead, he's simply falling asleep to the sound of white noise, seemingly to keep the oppressive silence of his isolation at bay. The word "static" also

suggests something that is flat, unchanging, and rather lifeless. This adds to the idea that the radio's static echoes the listlessness the father feels. His days are frightfully repetitive and empty.

#### Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 21-22:** "He will now go to sleep / Listening to the static on the radio,"



## POETIC DEVICES

### IMAGERY

The poem's [imagery](#) illustrates the dull monotony and discomfort of the father's life. As he heads home from work, for example, he's "Standing among silent commuters in the yellow light." Readers can envision the train bathed in sickly artificial light and filled with people who don't talk to or perhaps even look at one another. "Suburbs slide past" the train's windows as it moves further from the city. The image is dreary; this commute doesn't seem pleasant.

The poem's descriptions of the father himself are no less dismal. "His shirt and pants are soggy" from the "monsoon" season's humidity and rain, his jacket is "stained with mud," and his tote bag, brimming with books, is "falling apart." The weather is hot and sticky, and he looks shabby and uncomfortable. His eyes are "dimmed by age," lacking their former brightness or any spark of excitement. Instead of lighting up at the prospect of going home, they simply "fade homeward through the humid monsoon night." The word "fade" suggests that he's not exactly excited to get home because of all the good things that await him; rather, he's simply worn down and ready to get off this train.

Thick [sibilance](#) ("Standing," "silent," "Suburbs slide past his unseeing eyes," etc.) and /f/ [alliteration](#) ("falling," "fade") enhance this imagery. The poem is quiet and muffled rather than brash and attention-grabbing. Those soft, ghostly sounds slip past, subtly mirroring the way that the father's presence doesn't seem to affect anyone else.

His discomfort doesn't abate when he makes it home. His leather sandals are "sticky with mud," and readers can perhaps hear them squelching as he "hurries onward." His tea is "weak" and his "chapati" is "stale"; home feels as bland and tiresome as the train. Later, the speaker envisions him standing "at the sink," his body "trembling" as "cold water" pours over his "brown hands." It isn't clear whether he is shaking from exhaustion or emotion; regardless, this imagery makes it easy to picture the scene at hand and to sense the father's vulnerability. The speaker also points out that a "few droplets cling to the greying hairs on his wrists." That the speaker is zooming in on these details suggests his own love and empathy for his father; he

notices that he is getting older.

#### Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-7:** "Standing among silent commuters in the yellow light / Suburbs slide past his unseeing eyes / His shirt and pants are soggy and his black raincoat / Stained with mud and his bag stuffed with books / Is falling apart. His eyes dimmed by age / fade homeward through the humid monsoon night."
- **Lines 12-14:** "His chappals are sticky with mud, but he hurries onward. / Home again, I see him drinking weak tea, / Eating a stale chapati"
- **Lines 17-19:** "Coming out he trembles at the sink, / The cold water running over his brown hands, / A few droplets cling to the greying hairs on his wrists."

### ASYNDETON

[Asyndeton](#) appears a handful of times in the poem, affecting its rhythm and tone. For example, take a look at lines 10-12:

He hurries across the length of the grey platform,  
Crosses the railway line, enters the lane,  
His chapals are sticky with mud [...]

Asyndeton speeds up the passage, in turn evoking the speed with which the speaker's father "hurries" home. The lack of conjunctions also makes these activities butt up against one another, creating tension and making the father's trek sound more exhausting.

Asyndeton appears again in lines 13-14, when the speaker sees his father "drinking weak tea, / Eating a stale chapati, reading a book." Here, the lack of any coordinating conjunction between "stale chapati" and "reading a book" makes this list of activities feel incomplete. The speaker isn't necessarily describing one specific memory here but rather is listing out the kinds of things his father would have been doing when he got home from work. There were probably various other things he might have been doing at this time in addition to these, but these three examples give the reader a succinct glimpse into his life.

The poem also ends with asyndeton, as the speaker pictures his father

Listening to the static on the radio, dreaming  
Of his ancestors and grandchildren, thinking  
Of nomads entering a subcontinent through a  
narrow pass.

Here, asyndeton and the [parallelism](#) of "listening"/"dreaming"/"thinking" combine to create a solemn, lulling rhythm. The poem sounds like it's trailing off, much as the father himself drifts off to sleep.



**Where Asyndeton appears in the poem:**

- **Lines 10-12:** "He hurries across the length of the grey platform, / Crosses the railway line, enters the lane, / His chappals are sticky with mud"
- **Lines 13-14:** "I see him drinking weak tea, / Eating a stale chapati, reading a book."
- **Lines 18-19:** "The cold water running over his brown hands, / A few droplets cling to the greying hairs on his wrists."
- **Lines 22-24:** "Listening to the static on the radio, dreaming / Of his ancestors and grandchildren, thinking / Of nomads entering a subcontinent through a narrow pass."

**SIMILE**

The poem uses a single [simile](#) in lines 8-9, when the speaker says:

Now I can see him getting off the train  
Like a word dropped from a long sentence.

The train is the sentence in this simile, and the father is "dropped from" it because he's gotten off. The simile implies that his exit isn't all that notable to anyone else. He's just one "word" among many in a "long sentence," his absence hardly missed. Dropping a word from a "long sentence" probably won't change its meaning all that much. The simile thus reflects the father's feelings of insignificance; no one notices him leaving the train or cares whether he's there or not.

More broadly, the simile hints that the modern world has a tendency to make people feel irrelevant and even disposable. People might all be part of the same "sentence," but they don't matter (or at least don't feel like they matter) on an individual level. Everything moves so quickly in the modern world that people become expendable; the "sentence" goes on without them, just as the train speeds ahead after the father exits.

**Where Simile appears in the poem:**

- **Lines 8-9:** "Now I can see him getting off the train / Like a word dropped from a long sentence."

**ENJAMBMENT**

"Father Returning Home" features occasional [enjambment](#) that creates moments of anticipation and momentum. The poem's opening lines lack punctuation, making them *appear* enjambed on the page despite containing implied pauses based on their grammar and syntax. For example, line 1 should really contain a comma (or even a full stop) after the word "train"; likewise, there's an implied pause after "light" in line 2. The lack of punctuation at the ends of these lines makes them feel

somewhat unsteady; there's a tension between what the reader *sees* and what the reader *hears*. This tension, in turn, suggests the discomfort of the father's commute home on the train. He can't relax and settle into his surroundings yet, and he doesn't seem entirely in control here.

There are then some clearer enjambments between lines 4-7 before a clear [end-stop](#) after "night":

[...] and his black raincoat  
Stained with mud and his bag stuffed with books  
Is falling apart. His eyes dimmed by age  
fade homeward through the humid monsoon night.

All in all, the lack of punctuation pulls the reader further and further down the page. The poem just keeps going and going, its rhythms evoking the arduous nature of the father's commute.

There are some enjambments throughout the middle of the poem, but the bulk of lines 7-19 are [end-stopped](#). This makes the poem sound quite straightforward and matter-of-fact; the speaker is just describing what he sees in his memories, his father's simple routines. The lack of enjambments here might be seen to echo the lack of mystery and excitement in the father's life.

The poem then returns to enjambment in its final moments:

[...] He will now go to sleep  
Listening to the static on the radio, dreaming  
Of his ancestors and grandchildren, thinking  
Of nomads [...]

The poem flows forward through these lines, its smooth transitions mirroring the feeling of drifting off to sleep.

**Where Enjambment appears in the poem:**

- **Lines 4-5:** "raincoat / Stained"
- **Lines 5-6:** "books / Is"
- **Lines 6-7:** "age / fade"
- **Lines 8-9:** "train / Like"
- **Lines 15-16:** "contemplate / Man's"
- **Lines 20-21:** "share / Jokes"
- **Lines 21-22:** "sleep / Listening"
- **Lines 22-23:** "dreaming / Of"
- **Lines 23-24:** "thinking / Of"

**PARALLELISM**

[Parallelism](#) is an important part of "Father Returning Home." In lines 4-5, for instance, the speaker describes his father using three grammatically parallel phrases:

- "his black raincoat / Stained with mud"
- "his bag stuffed with books"

- "His eyes dimmed by age"

These phrases feature the same grammatical construction (as well as [anaphora](#) of "his"), which creates a steady, even monotonous, rhythm. That is, the descriptions all *sound the same* as they hammer home the idea that the father is utterly disheveled. The [polysyndeton](#) of "and his black raincoat [...] and his bag stuffed with books" adds to the poem's dejected, weary tone, as the pitiful elements of the father's appearance seem to pile on top of each other.

There is more parallelism in line 11 ("Crosses the railway line, enters the lane") and lines 13-14 ("drinking weak tea, / Eating a stale chapati, reading a book"). In these examples, parallelism again suggests the monotonous nature of the father's routine. The language here is predictable rather than surprising or exciting, which mirrors how unchanging, and how uninteresting, the father's life is from day to day.

Finally, there's some striking parallelism in the last three lines of the poem as the speaker describes his father

Listening to the static on the radio, dreaming  
Of his ancestors and grandchildren, thinking  
Of nomads entering a subcontinent through a  
narrow pass.

Here, the repetitive nature of the poem's language has a kind of lulling effect, appropriate for lines about the father drifting off to sleep. One action slips into another, the sound of the radio slipping into dreams of family, into dreams of ancient ancestors. Parallelism creates a sense of connection between each of these clauses, as though the poem is zooming out and moving through time: from the speaker in the present, to his family both past and future, to ancient peoples who crossed into India.

The similarity of the language further calls attention to the sharp [juxtaposition](#) between these images: the father falling asleep to mundane white noise is something vastly different than the epic image of "nomads entering a subcontinent." Perhaps the father wonders how history has led to this moment in his life, how his modern existence is so different from that of his ancestors and yet still a part of that same story. They're all part of the same lineage, the same long family line, yet the downtrodden father can connect with this only in his dreams.

#### Where Parallelism appears in the poem:

- **Lines 4-5:** "and his black raincoat / Stained with mud and his bag stuffed with books"
- **Line 6:** "His eyes dimmed by age"
- **Line 11:** "Crosses the railway line, enters the lane,"
- **Lines 13-14:** "drinking weak tea, / Eating a stale chapati, reading a book."

- **Lines 22-24:** "Listening to the static on the radio, dreaming / Of his ancestors and grandchildren, thinking / Of nomads entering a subcontinent through a narrow pass."



## VOCABULARY

**Commuters** (Line 2) - People traveling to or from work. The word is usually used in reference to people who work in a city but live in the suburbs outside of it.

**Monsoon** (Line 7) - A seasonal wind in southern and Southeast Asia. The monsoon season in India runs from June to September and is marked by intense humidity and often torrential rains.

**Chappals** (Line 12) - Leather sandals often worn in India.

**Chapati** (Line 14) - An Indian flatbread.

**Estrangement** (Line 16) - Hostile separation from.

**Sullen** (Lines 20-21) - Moody and unresponsive.

**Nomads** (Lines 23-24) - *Nomads* are people without permanent dwellings, who wander from place to place.

**Subcontinent** (Lines 23-24) - A large, mostly self-contained area of a continent. Here, this refers specifically to the Indian subcontinent. In addition to India, this region is also home to Bangladesh, Pakistan, Bhutan, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Maldives.

**Pass** (Lines 23-24) - A passage; a way through mountains or other difficult terrain. This is almost certainly a specific reference to the Khyber Pass, part of an important trade route between the Indian subcontinent and Central Asia.



## FORM, METER, & RHYME

### FORM

"Father Returning Home" consists of 24 lines of [free verse](#) arranged as a single stanza. The long, undivided stanza subtly conveys the tiring monotony of the speaker's father's life. Frequent [enjambments](#) also pull the reader down the page without much time to pause, evoking the father's restlessness and inability to feel like he belongs.

### METER

The poem is written in [free verse](#), so it doesn't use a set [meter](#). This lack of meter keeps the poem's language conversational, as though the reader is right there with the speaker looking back on their father's life. The poem's language is natural and ordinary rather than overtly poetic, which makes sense for a poem about an ordinary life.

## RHYME SCHEME

As a [free verse](#) poem, "Father Returning Home" doesn't use a [rhyme scheme](#). As with the lack of [meter](#), this lack of rhyme scheme helps to create the poem's conversational, matter-of-fact [tone](#). The poem's natural, prose-like language suits this portrait of an ordinary man going about any ordinary task: commuting home from work.



## SPEAKER

Dilip Chitre based the poem on his own experiences watching his father return from work in the late 1950s, so it's fair to interpret the speaker as Chitre himself.

That said, all readers know from the poem is that the speaker is someone whose father works in a city a fair distance from home. And though the poem is written in the present tense ("Now I can see him," "I see him drinking weak tea," etc.), it's implied that the speaker is actually now an adult and looking back on the past. The speaker mentions his father's "sullen children" as if he himself weren't one of them, for example, thereby maintaining some distance from the action of the poem. The speaker seems to be remembering certain moments from his childhood and imagining others that he couldn't possibly have witnessed. For instance, while the speaker may remember what his father looked like as he sat and ate a "stale chapati," he wouldn't have known what his father looked like on the train or what he dreamed about as he fell asleep.

These intimate details suggest that the speaker is looking back on his childhood with empathy and understanding towards his father—feelings that he perhaps didn't have access to when he was younger. In a way, the poem is just as much a reflection of the *speaker* growing older and seeing his father differently as it is a portrait of his *father* at a certain point in time.



## SETTING

The poem was inspired by Chitre's childhood, so readers can assume it takes place in India. Details like the mention of "chapati," an Indian flatbread, and "chappals," leather sandals often worn in India, support this reading.

The poem more specifically takes place as the speaker's father is commuting home from work in a city. The poem's first half describes him boarding a "late evening train," suggesting that he's been working long hours, and standing surrounded by other "silent commuters" in the train's "yellow" artificial lights. The scene feels pretty dismal; these people aren't speaking to each other or enjoying the scenery that flashes by the train's windows. Instead, they come across as tired and isolated. It's also "monsoon" season: a hot, humid time of year that brings heavy rain. After the speaker's father gets off the train, he

hurries through the wet, sticky weather to reach his home.

The second half of the poem takes place inside the father's house. The fact that he spends his evening "drinking weak tea," eating "stale" bread, and washing his hands with "cold water" all suggest that this isn't a very warm, welcoming space—not for the speaker's father, at least.

While the poem takes place in India, its images of weary travelers packed into a dreary train, silently heading home late at night from their jobs in the city, reflect the reality of life in many urban areas across the globe.



## CONTEXT

### LITERARY CONTEXT

Dilip Chitre (1938-2009) was one of India's most well-known poets and critics. The multilingual Chitre wrote in both English and Marathi, and he was also an accomplished translator (best known for his translations of the poetry of the 17th-century Marathi saint Tukaram). "Father Returning Home" was published in his first English-language collection, *Travelling in a Cage*, in 1980.

Chitre's work often explores themes of exile and alienation (the latter of which is apparent in this poem with the father's deep sense of "estrangement" from the world around him). Like many poets of his day, Chitre was also interested in challenging the norms and traditions of pre-20th-century literature. Writing in the wake of India's independence, Chitre believed that the influence of the West had led Indian poets to overlook their own nation's rich artistic history. His translations and bilingual writing were, in part, a means of championing a distinctly Indian literary voice and canon.

Many poets have explored the often invisible sacrifices parents make for their children. For comparison, readers may wish to check out Robert Hayden's "[Those Winter Sundays](#)," in which the poet reflects on how his father would get up early to warm the house for his family.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"Father Returning Home" was published in 1980, but when writing it, Chitre drew on his own memories of his father, Purushottam Chitre, coming home from work in the 1950s. The elder Chitre moved the family from Baroda to the much larger city of Mumbai when the poet was 12 years old. The mention of a "bag stuffed with books" in this poem likely nods to the fact that he was a magazine publisher.

The poem more broadly speaks to the growth of suburban life in post-war societies across the globe, as well as the subsequent boom in the number of people commuting to and from work in cities. When Chitre was growing up, men were by and large family breadwinners while women stayed home with



the children. In many ways, men lived separate lives at work in the city, only seeing their families for brief periods at night or on the weekends.

- [More Poems About Fathers](#) — A collection of poems about fathers from The Academy of American Poets. (<https://poets.org/text/poems-about-fathers>)



## MORE RESOURCES

### EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- [Listen to the Poem Aloud](#) — An animated recording of "Father Returning Home." ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xq7xSiut00s&ab\\_channel=Extramarks](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xq7xSiut00s&ab_channel=Extramarks))
- [A Bilingual, Multi-Disciplinary Artist](#) — Read a short overview of Chitre's many accomplishments, courtesy of Poetry International. ([https://www.poetryinternational.com/en/poets-poems/poets/poet/102-13518\\_Chitre](https://www.poetryinternational.com/en/poets-poems/poets/poet/102-13518_Chitre))



## HOW TO CITE

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