History

SUMMARY

The speaker is flying kites as the sand ripples along the beach and the smell of gasoline from Leuchars (a neighboring town that houses a Royal Air Force base) wafts over the golf course. The distant, blue-gray tide is very low. Other people are out for a run or pausing to stare up at the fighter jets that tilt and change direction in the morning sun.

The speaker's mind is preoccupied with recent events and filled with dull fear and anxiety about what might happen next.

The speaker gets down on his knees in the sand with his son, Lucas, to collect seashells and small rocks. They discover signs of life amidst all the broken, washed-up bits: snail shells, scraps of razorfish, and stains from seaweed and other sea life left on rocks that have been worn smooth by the tide.

Sometimes the speaker thinks that people's identities have less to do with who they're related to or where they're born and more to do with the gap between the world they lay claim to and what they dream about on days like today, when the kite's string is pulled taut in the wind while the speaker's body is planted firmly on the beach.

Because despite being boxed in by their possessions, what really anchors people to the rest of the world, the speaker says, are all these things they notice in the water as they read from the book of the ocean, with its pink and blue sea creatures mingling with a child's innocence.

Sometimes the speaker gets completely overwhelmed at the thought of losing it all—the whole planet and everything that lives in it. People give up so much to the virtual world that they barely even notice the push and pull of each other's bodies and hardly take in the moment unfolding in front of them. They don't notice the way light and weather subtly change, or the humble, more immediate events taking place all around them: a fish getting caught in an ocean current; the sleepless koi in city ponds, their beautiful bodies held captive, stuck in their own slowly shifting gold skins; empty jars filled with fish eggs or little fish or goldfish brought home from the fair as the radio plays.

But this is the real issue, the speaker continues: how can people live in this precious, beloved world without hurting it or each other?

A small child on the beach, picking through the driftwood and dried-up seaweed, confused by the markings on a seashell.

And his parents on the big mounds of sand, with their kite tethered to the sky, its line taut.

How can people be patient or live with fear and yet, in spite of it all, pay close attention to what can't be saved?

THEMES

FEAR, UNCERTAINTY, AND CONNECTION

"History" alludes to the September 11 terrorist attacks against the United States. The speaker is visiting the beach with his family, his mind heavy with "the news" of the attacks and distracted by uncertainty over what's going to happen next. His mind also drifts to less obvious but still imminent dangers, such as environmental destruction and the alienation caused by an increasingly capitalistic, "virtual" world. The only real way to counter this constant hum of fear, the poem suggests, is to be deeply aware of your immediate surroundings. In other words, people should remain "attentive" to the present rather than getting so caught up in the big stuff that they overlook the "quiet, local forms of history"—the little things going on right under their noses.

As he wanders the beach with his family, the speaker grapples with his fears about the world he lives in. He describes people on the beach "stopping to watch" the "war planes" flying past as well as his own "muffled dread" about the consequences of the attacks. The poem takes place in "West Sands," a beach in Scotland, so it's less that the speaker feels immediately threatened than that these events have brought up bigger questions about the general state of the world. At a time when people are "confined by property" and in danger of losing their connection to the earth in favor of "the virtual," the speaker feels overcome by fear and anxiety.

Yet the speaker keeps coming back to the present moment, suggesting that there's something anchoring about paying close attention to what you can actually see and touch. The speaker says he "knelt down in the sand" with "Lucas" (his son), "gathering shells and pebbles and finding evidence of life in all this / driftwork." And because the speaker believes it's all too easy to "scarcely register the drift and tug / of other bodies" in today's "virtual" world, he pays close attention to "the moment as it happens," noticing "the fish lodged in the tide" and the subtle "shifts of light." The poem suggests that staying rooted in these small, "quiet" moments can help fend off the "dread" and despair of violent, uncertain times.

In its final moments, the poem describes parents flying kites that are "plugged into the sky" while their toddler, "sifting wood and dried weed from the sand," is "puzzled by the pattern on a shell." These images suggest that the parents are caught up in what's going on in the world at large (they're looking up at the sky, and "plugged in" suggests not being able to take their minds off the news). By contrast, the child is focused on something small and perplexing in front of him; he is ignorant of and thus

unbothered by the "history" being made. His fascination with the tiny shells and pebbles on the beach suggests that focusing on what's right in front of you is one way to "be alive [...] and do no harm."

Still, the poem doesn't suggest the parents are wrong to be worried about the future. On the contrary, it suggests that people can be "afraid" and "attentive to the irredeemable" (i.e., things that can't be saved) at the same time. Indeed, the poem implies that the world itself is "irredeemable"—all those little lives broken apart by the sea's waves and washed to shore suggest that nothing lasts, even in the best of times. Yet there's beauty and value in paying close attention to them. Thus, the poem illustrates that one can't fixate entirely on big-picture stuff—life is just as much about the minutiae as anything else.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-73

INNOCENCE, CURIOSITY, AND VULNERABILITY

The speaker of "History" believes the central "problem" of life is "how to be alive / in all this gazed-upon and cherished world / and do no harm." Shaken by violent events, he's sorting out his own relationship to both "local" and global history—and wondering how to exist on this planet without contributing to humanity's violence against other people and nature. Though the poem offers no pat solutions, it honors the gentle curiosity and openness often displayed by children. Children's innocence, the poem suggests, encourages a meaningful connection with and respect for one's surroundings.

The speaker says that "what tethers us to gravity and light"—that is, what really keeps us connected to the world and to each other—includes "the rose or petrol blue / of jellyfish and sea anemone / combining with a child's / first nakedness." This nakedness symbolizes the child's purity, reflecting the idea that he has not yet been corrupted or marred by the world. The speaker's son doesn't know or care about "the news," and the "dread" and anxiety that plague his parents haven't dampened his enjoyment of this day at the beach. That nakedness also makes the child vulnerable (he could easily get stung by those jellyfish!), but he is far too absorbed in the details of what he can see and touch to really care: the "shells and pebbles," the "smudges of weed and flesh on tideworn stone," the "pattern on a shell." His innocence allows him to remain attentive to something as small and immediate as "the pattern on a shell," to mingle with his surroundings without an undercurrent of fear.

The speaker begins the next stanza by declaring, "Sometimes I am dizzy with the fear / of losing everything." Filled with anxiety about world events, the speaker seems to feel a protective instinct toward the sweetness and purity of childhood. He "kneels" to be closer to his son, and together they look for "evidence of life" amidst the "snail shell" and "shreds of razorfish." This suggests both the speaker's tenderness toward his child and that they both care about what happens to the disoriented creatures that have been washed to shore.

The poem suggests that this loving and protective attitude toward "living creatures" is part of any adult's responsibility in a violent world. The speaker isn't just concerned with protecting his "toddler," but also with showing him how to be a caring and gentle person. He is "patient" and "attentive" to the moment they're sharing, and "register[s]" the bodies around him—his son's, but also those of "jellyfish and sea anemone." These acts of care don't exactly negate the fact that there are "war planes" flying by, but they do suggest that a more humane and caring world is possible—and that it requires getting in touch with our childlike selves: the side of us that's innately curious about, trusting of, and respectful toward the planet.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 15-22
- Lines 30-39
- Lines 50-62
- Lines 63-73

HUMANITY, IDENTITY, AND NATURE

For the speaker of "History," identity isn't about "kinship nor our given states." That is, it's not about who we're related to or where we're born. Instead, what "makes us who we are" *transcends* human-made categories: it's "something lost between the world we own / and what we dream about behind the names / on days like this." In other words, some core of humanity exists beyond the boundaries of the society that humanity has created—beyond the "names" (like "St. Andrews West Sands") and the property that "confine[s]" us. What ultimately connects us and makes us human, the poem suggests, involves our relationship to the earth itself, to *nature*: the often-ignored "book" that teaches us "who we are."

The family's choice to fly kites on the beach in the wake of "the news" of the terrorist attacks isn't arbitrary; it suggests the *necessity* of reconnecting to nature in times of violence and despair. Indeed, the colorful life that the poem describes—the "rose or petrol blue / of jellyfish and sea anemone"—inspires curiosity and joy. Nature "combin[es] with a child's / first nakedness"—the vulnerability and openness of feeling small and humbled by nature—to create wonder where before there was only "dread."

Nature—"the book / of silt and tides"—instructs people to be amazed, delighted, and in tune with its "shifting" presence. We may get carried away by the overwhelming tides of history, but

the poem suggests that to pay attention to nature is to learn how to heal our relationship with the earth—and to minimize the horrible ways we harm it and ourselves. Broadly, then, the poem presents nature's diversity, vibrancy, and wildness—and the deep love they inspire—as a potential antidote to war and human destruction. When human history becomes chaotic, the poem suggests that renewing our relationship to nature helps ground us.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-73

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-5

Today ...
... the golf links;

"History" begins with an epigraph that establishes its setting: *"St Andrews: West Sands; September 2001."* The poem takes place on a beach in Scotland sometime around the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the United States—an enormous event in world "history." It's possible that the poem is set on September 11 itself, with the speaker describing what he is doing as the tragedy unfolds across the ocean. Alternatively, it takes place a few days later, as the world continues to grapple with the enormity of the event and what it means for the future.

The speaker focuses on, or at least *tries* to focus on, his immediate surroundings: "Today," he says, he is flying "kites" on the beach. The sand is "spinning off in ribbons," a reference to the patterns left by the tide, while "that gasoline smell from Leuchars"—a nearby town with a Royal Air Force base—is "gusting across" the links of the local golf course.

The use of present participles (those "-ing" verbs) ground the poem firmly in the moment while also conveying the flow of time; this scene isn't static but in constant motion. Enjambment adds to that sense of movement as well, pulling the reader smoothly down the page. Note, too, how the poet frequently indents lines, creating a kind of see-sawing sensation as the reader's eye moves back and forth across the white spaces on the page.

The sibilant alliteration of "sand spinning" evokes the quiet, peaceful beauty of this landscape, but the mention of the smell of petrol hints at the tension and danger lurking in the background. The firm /g/ alliteration of "gasoline," "gusting," and "golf" suggests the strength of the scent of that gas, which is certainly not what one expects to smell while walking alongside the ocean.

LINES 6-11

the tide far ...
... the morning light—

The speaker continues to describe the beach. The tide is quite "far out," meaning that it's low, and it's the "grey" color of a "quail," a kind of bird. People are "jogging" along, sometimes "stopping to watch" as "war planes" (presumably from the nearby Royal Air Force base in Leuchars) fly past.

Some people are just going about their business, it seems, but others' eyes are fixed on the sky. The beach—normally a place of relaxation and play—is overshadowed by the recent terrorist attacks. (Although those attacks took place in the United States, across an ocean, their impact and implications were felt across the globe.) What should be a fun, peaceful day is tarnished by the reality of what's going on in the world at large.

Once again, enjambment fills the poem with anticipation and a sense of forward momentum, pulling readers down the page as the scene unfolds:

> people
> jogging, or stopping to watch
> as the war planes cambered and turned
> in the morning light—

The smooth, rhythmic assonance of "jogging, or stopping to watch" adds to the poem's sense of movement as well.

LINES 12-14

today ...
... what may come—

The second stanza again begins with the word "today," firmly grounding the poem in the speaker's present. Note, too, that this "today" is a continuation of the same sentence begun in the first stanza: the speaker is trying to tell readers what is happening "today / as we flew the kites," but he keeps getting sidetracked. In lines 13 and 14, he cuts himself off again:

> —with the news in my mind, and the muffled dread
> of what may come—

Though he's trying to focus on what's going on in the moment (readers learn shortly that he's at the beach with his son), he keeps getting pulled back to "the news" of the terrorist attacks. The poem only ever subtly alludes to these events, however; the speaker isn't *directly* engaging with them, but instead is showing how they hover in the background.

The muted /m/ alliteration and consonance in these ("my mind," "muffled," "may come") lines echo the "muffled" nature of the speaker's anxiety. Perhaps he's trying to tamp down his fear and anxiety for his family's sake, or maybe he's just not yet able to fully process his own feelings about what might happen next. In any case, these feelings threaten to pull him away from the moment he's sharing with his family.

LINES 15-22

I knelt down ...
... on tideworn stone.

The poem's first sentence carries on into the third stanza, with the speaker now finally arriving at its main clause. Cutting out the many digressions, the sentence would read: "Today as we flew the kites I knelt down in the sand
with Lucas gathering shells and pebbles."

The speaker's actions here convey his love for his child (the poem clarifies that "Lucas" is the speaker's young son a little later). Though his mind is on "the news," he's trying to focus his attention on his child and the moment that they're sharing.

Together, they're "gathering shells / and pebbles" from the beach, "finding evidence of life in all this / driftwork." They find sea shells as well as marks left by seaweed and sea creatures on rocks. Note how all this "evidence," these empty shells and "tideworn stone[s]," speak to the story of the ocean and of the creatures who have lived there. Even as the speaker's mind is distracted by huge, world-changing events, "history" is happening all the time on this smaller scale right at the beach; creatures live and die, and stones are worn smooth by the endless motion of the tide.

Enjambment continues to propel the reader forward through the poem. The stark indentations within these lines fill the page with blank space, forcing the reader's eye to sweep back and forth across the page in a way that might mimic the search for "evidence of life" across the beach. These lines are also thick with sibilance, which evokes the gentle lapping of the water or a soft breeze blowing across the landscape:

> snail shells; shreds of razorfish;
> smudges of weed and flesh on timeworn stone.

The delicate sounds of these lines draw attention to these seemingly insignificant bits and pieces of nature, suggesting, perhaps, that they aren't any less important than the goings-on of humanity, the "history" being made between nations.

However, sorting through "driftwork" for "evidence of life" might also make readers think of the horrible events simultaneously unfolding in New York City, where rescue workers would have been sorting through debris after the Twin Towers' collapse in search of bodies.

LINES 23-29

At times I ...
... to the shore

The speaker begins to think about identity—"what makes us who we are." We're not defined by "kinship nor our given states," he says. That is, the thing that "makes us who we are" isn't who we're related to or where we're born; our shared humanity transcends national borders and blood ties.

Who we are, the speaker continues, has something to do with what gets "lost" in the gap "between the world we own / and what we dream about behind the names." By this, the speaker might mean there some essential part of ourselves exists beyond the world we lay claim to. The "world we own" might refer to society, with all its arbitrary divisions; those "names" might refer to family names or location names (like "St. Andrews West Sands"). What makes people who they are and what connects people to each other, the poem suggests, exists "behind" these names—beyond specific markers of identity and place. Our humanity runs deeper than the labels human beings put on things.

It's not clear which part of the previous sentence the phrase "on days like this" refers to. The enjambment of this stanza makes the lines flow into each other, rendering their meaning somewhat ambiguous. The speaker might be saying that it's "on days like this" that "something" gets "lost between the world we own / and what we dream about." Perhaps the violence of the terrorist attacks has shaken some part of human identity loose, upending "the world we own." Maybe the speaker is saying that people are defined by their shared grief, fear, and confusion "on days like this."

Or, maybe, the speaker means the phrase more positively: perhaps it's "on days like this" that "we dream about" this place that exists "behind the names." That is, "we dream about" a better world on days like this, or we imagine a web of connection between people across the globe. The image of the speaker's body "anchored to the shore" while his kite string is "raised in the wind" might represent the way our minds can soar beyond the confines of our bodies and envision this better world.

LINES 30-39

and though we ...
... first nakedness.

The speaker goes on to say that "though we are confined by property," the things we *own* aren't what connects us to the rest of the world—"to gravity and light." Again, the speaker is rejecting human-imposed divisions of the world, which serve only to "confine" us—to turn us into objects and restrict our freedom.

What really connects us to the earth, the speaker says, "has most to do with the distances and the shapes / we find in water." In other words, human beings should look to *nature*, rather than our *possessions*, if we want to feel grounded. The speaker uses a metaphor to describe looking into the water as "reading from the book / of silt and tides." Comparing nature to a "book" suggests that the natural world is filled with wisdom and knowledge.

The poet continues to use iambic pentameter in these lines, creating a steady rhythm. Note, however, that sometimes the poet seems to visually slice pentameter lines in half on the

page, as with lines 33-34. Though these are *technically* two lines, they read aloud like a *single* line of iambic pentameter:

we find | in wat- | er / rea- | ding from | the book

The poem sweeps back and forth across the page at moments like this, subtly evoking those "tides."

The speaker then describes some of the things contained in that "book of silt and tides." There's "the rose or petrol blue / of jellyfish and sea anemone," which mix "with a child's / first nakedness." The speaker is probably describing his son playing in the shallow water or a tidepool. This imagery of colorful sea creatures "combining" with his "nakedness" suggests that this is how things should be; it's a reminder that people are part of the natural world rather than separate from it. The child's "nakedness" symbolizes his purity, innocence, and vulnerability. He hasn't yet been hardened by the world, and he's still ignorant of the way human beings hurt each other and the earth. His innocence, the poem suggests, is what allows him to connect so easily with nature, granting him a sense of curiosity, wonder, and openness that adults tend to lack.

LINES 40-45

Sometimes I am ...
... of other bodies

The sight of an innocent child playing in the water seems to prompt the speaker's protective instincts. He now confesses that there are times when he is "dizzy with the fear / of losing everything." He's frightened not just of further violence, but of total environmental collapse: the loss of "the sea, the sky, / all living creatures, forests, estuaries." The asyndeton of this list makes the images come at the reader thick and fast, conveying the speaker's growing panic as he considers the destruction of the earth. This might be from large-scale warfare, but also from things like modern consumerism and the demand for the cheap, mass production of goods.

The speaker has already said that nature can teach us "who we are." But if people destroy the planet, then there will be no "book of silt and tides" to read from; there will be no "jellyfish and sea anemone" around to spark a child's wonder and curiosity. Destroying nature, the poem implies, destroys our ability to truly know ourselves.

The speaker also gestures toward other harmful aspects of modernity, such as the way we "trade so much to know the virtual." People are so plugged into "the news," glued to televisions and computer screens, that they "scarcely register the drift and tug / of other bodies." (Note that this poem was written before the widespread use of smartphones; the speaker's anxiety about "the virtual" is quite prescient!) The "virtual" isolates us; even though we're surrounded by other living creatures all the time, we feel alone and disconnected. Whereas the innocent child can fully "combine" with the sea and its creatures, adults barely register "the drift and tug / of other bodies."

LINES 46-51

scarcely apprehend ...
... beyond the sands;

In addition to barely noticing the other living beings moving all around us, we also "scarcely apprehend" (perceive or make sense of) "the moment as it happens." In other words, we're so caught up in what's going on across the world or fretting about the future that we barely notice the happenings right in front of us. Diacope (the repetition of "scarcely" in lines 44 and 46) hammers home the speaker's point, emphasizing just how little we tend to pay attention to our actual, immediate lives.

But "the moment as it happens," the poem suggests, is no less important than the big picture. Simple "shifts of light / and weather" are every bit as worthy of our attention. "History" isn't just a record of life-shattering events, of wars and violence and political machinations. "History" is also "the quiet, local" things happening right under our noses—things we could easily miss by not paying attention.

The speaker points to a "fish lodged in the tide / beyond the sands" as an example of this kind of history. Humans like to think their affairs are more important than anything else, but the speaker thinks this fish is worth noticing. The fish's struggle certainly matters to the fish, and the fish is part of the same natural world that human beings call home.

LINES 52-62

the long insomnia ...
... hum of radio

The speaker lists out other "local forms / of history"—other small-scale events that the poem suggests are no less a part of the story of the world than anything else. There are the "bright" koi fish "in public parks" that seem to never sleep. While their wild cousins swim free, these "ornamental," or decorative, fish have been bred in "captiv[ity]" for their beautiful "gold" markings, which slowly shift and change over time.

The speaker nods to other ways in which people take from the environment: there are those who bring empty "jamjars" to the ocean or lakes or rivers and collect "spawn / and sticklebacks," or kids who bring home "goldfish" in plastic bags from fairs. Clearly, the earth is a source of beauty, pleasure, and delight, adding joy and meaning to people's lives; many readers likely have happy memories of getting a goldfish or gathering up little creatures at the beach. At the same time, the poem suggests that humanity's sense of entitlement and mindless extraction of its resources is killing that very wellspring of joy. The poem might be suggesting that people need to learn to appreciate the planet in ways that aren't actively harmful to it; that we must "apprehend the moment as it happens" without trying to "own" it.

Almost every other line here is heavily indented, creating a great deal of white space on the page. There's also lots of enjambment, the speaker spreading each image out across multiple lines. The poem unfolds smoothly yet slowly; the speaker is taking his time here, granting each example space and respect.

The sounds of the lines also make their imagery more intense. The assonance of "long insomnia" evokes a yawn, while crisp alliteration ("public parks," "carp," "captive") and consonance ("carp," "public parks," "captive") suggest the"brightness" of the carps' colorful markings. There's the alliteration of "spawn and sticklebacks" as well, plus the long /o/ sounds of "own," "gold," "home" and "radio." In short, these lines are intensely musical. The poet has taken great care with the sounds of the poem here, reflecting the importance of even these "quiet, local forms of history."

LINES 63-68

but this is ...
... on a shell

The speaker wonders how to best exist in this "cherished," or precious, world without hurting it. Keeping carp captive in "public parks" or putting goldfish in jars might make *people* happy, but this isn't exactly fun for those creatures. People should delight in the beauty of the world, the poem suggests, but that delight shouldn't come at the cost of "harm[ing]" the earth or each other. It's not enough just to pay attention to the "quiet, local forms of history"; treating the world with loving, gentle care, the poem argues, is a difficult yet noble aspiration.

The speaker then looks to his son as an example of what this might look like, watching him "sifting wood and dried weed from the sand" and appearing "puzzled by the pattern on a shell." The child is completely fascinated by the world in front of him; he's not thinking about "the news" that's distracting his father, nor does he seem worried about the future. He's existing in the moment, attentive to his surroundings without doing them any "harm."

The delicate alliteration of these lines highlights the boy's tender interest in the natural world:

> sifting wood and dried weed from the sand
> and puzzled by the pattern on a shell

LINES 69-73

his parents on ...
... to the irredeemable.

The poem juxtaposes the toddler's position with that of his parents, in turn contrasting the child's innocence and curiosity with his parents' anxiety and awareness.

While this toddler is down in the sand, carefully poking through bits of driftwood and seaweed, his parents are standing in the depressions between the sand dunes. They're flying a kite, which the speaker metaphorically describes as being "plugged into the sky." This phrasing might as easily apply to the parents themselves, who are perhaps "plugged into the sky" in that they're staring up at the passing "war planes" or just in the sense that they're so caught in what's happening across the world that they overlook the wonders of the beach beneath their feet. The phrase "all nerve and line" again can apply to both the kite and the parents: the kite's string is pulled taught in the wind, but the parents, too, are perhaps rigid with attention and anxiety.

The poem's final two lines seem to harken back to the sentence begun in line 63:

> but this is the problem: how to be alive

The speaker is also wondering "how to be [...] patient" and how to "be afraid" without giving up hope. It's not that people should remain ignorant of world events or that it never makes sense to be anxious and afraid. Instead, the poem is saying that people must try to patiently balance such understandable fear with their attention toward "the irredeemable." Regardless of what is happening around us—and maybe even *because* of it—we must pay attention to those things that cannot be saved. The speaker doesn't know if the earth can be saved or protected; he doesn't know if human beings as a whole can learn to stop killing each other. But he does believe that staying grounded and present, loving and appreciating what is here now and may not be tomorrow, is a worthy endeavor.

SYMBOLS

THE CHILD'S NAKEDNESS

The speaker describes a toddler (who might be the speaker's son Lucas, or perhaps another child at the beach) playing in water that's filled with pink jellyfish and greenish-blue sea anemones. The speaker says that these creatures are "combining with the child's first nakedness." This nakedness symbolizes the child's innocence, purity, and vulnerability. These qualities, the poem implies, are what allow the child to essentially become one with nature in this scene. And it's the loss of this innocence, the poem suggests, that later separates people from their surroundings and from each other.

For now, the child isn't distracted by what's going on in the news but instead is focusing on the world in front of him. He's also quite vulnerable in this state, of course; both sea anemones and jellyfish can sting. Yet the child doesn't seem to worry about that. He isn't yet aware, perhaps, of how the world can hurt him, and this grants him a sense of openness and curiosity that adults often lack.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 36-39:** "the rose or petrol blue / of jellyfish and sea anemone / combining with a child's / first nakedness."

THE KITES

The speaker is flying kites at the beach, attempting to enjoy the day with his son even as earth-shaking "history" is unfolding across the globe. Throughout the poem, the speaker begins to blur the lines between the kite and his own body, and the kites ultimately seem to symbolize the tug that people feel between remaining present in the moment and tuned in to world events.

The speaker describes "our lines raised in the wind / our bodies fixed and anchored to the shore." Those "lines" literally refer to the kite's strings, but they might also reflect the idea that though the speaker is in Scotland, his mind is "raised in the wind" like the kite—soaring well past his immediate surroundings. Later, the speaker describes "parents on the dune slacks with a kite / plugged into the sky / all nerve and line." The phrase "plugged into the sky" seems to refer to both the kite, high above in the sky, and to the parents, who are "plugged into" the news (and perhaps watching for more "war planes" to fly past). Likewise, "all nerve and line" could describe both the kites' taught strings and the parents' rigid, brave, anxious bodies.

Finally, those "lines" might also represent human beings' links to other people; the shared web of humanity, the poem suggests, transcends both our physical bodies and the artificial borders we've imposed on the earth.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "as we flew the kites"
- **Lines 28-29:** "our lines raised in the wind / our bodies fixed and anchored to the shore"
- **Lines 69-71:** "his parents on the dune slacks with a kite / plugged into the sky / all nerve and line"

POETIC DEVICES

ENJAMBMENT

The poem is heavily enjambed. The speaker spreads thoughts and images out across multiple lines, slowing things down, creating anticipation, and lending the poem a thoughtful tone. The use of frequent indentation and white space further encourages readers to take their time with each new piece of "history" that the poem introduces.

In the poem's opening stanzas, enjambment mirrors the wandering nature of the speaker's thoughts. He gets getting pulled into long digressions about everything that's happening "today":

> —the sand spinning off in ribbons along the beach
> and that gasoline smell from Leuchars gusting across
> the golf links;
> [...]
> people
> jogging, or stopping to watch
> as the war planes cambered and turned
> in the morning light—

The scene unfurls down the page, pulling the reader deeper into the scene and building anticipation. The reader has to keep going if they want to know what, exactly, is happening while the speaker is flying kites; it takes multiple lines to arrive at the end of the sentence, and even then, the speaker interrupts his own thoughts and goes on so many mental detours that the reader has to exercise some patience to stay with him.

The enjambment of lines 15-16 works similarly:

> I knelt down in the sand
> with Lucas
> gathering shells
> and pebbles

The speaker stretches the scene out by essentially cutting lines in half, and as a result, the poem spends more time with this image of his son and encourages paying close attention to the scene at hand.

Enjambment also makes the poem's language more difficult to pin down at times, as phrases slide into each other and it becomes unclear where one thought ends and another begins. This is a deeply philosophical poem without easy answers, and the use of enjambment adds to its slipperiness and ambiguity. For example:

> At times I think what makes us who we are
> is neither kinship nor our given states
> but something lost between the world we own
> and what we dream about behind the names
> on days like this

It's not clear which clause "on days like this" belongs to. Is the speaker saying that something is lost "on days like this" or that it's "on days like this" that "we dream about [something lost] behind the names"? The slippery language might reflect the slippery nature of identity itself, as well as the inherent connection between human beings regardless of "kinship" or "our given states."

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "Today / as"
- **Lines 3-4:** "beach / and"
- **Lines 4-5:** "across / the"
- **Lines 6-7:** "out / and"
- **Lines 8-9:** "people / jogging"
- **Lines 9-10:** "watch / as"
- **Lines 10-11:** "turned / in"
- **Lines 13-14:** "dread / of"
- **Lines 15-16:** "sand / with"
- **Lines 17-18:** "shells / and"
- **Lines 19-20:** "this / driftwork"
- **Lines 23-24:** "are / is"
- **Lines 24-25:** "states / but"
- **Lines 25-26:** "own / and"
- **Lines 26-27:** "names / on"
- **Lines 27-28:** "this / our"
- **Lines 28-29:** "wind / our"
- **Lines 31-32:** "light / has"
- **Lines 32-33:** "shapes / we"
- **Lines 34-35:** "book / of"
- **Lines 36-37:** "blue / of"
- **Lines 37-38:** "anemone / combining"
- **Lines 38-39:** "child's / first"
- **Lines 40-41:** "fear / of"
- **Lines 44-45:** "tug / of"
- **Lines 46-47:** "apprehend / the"
- **Lines 47-48:** "light / and"
- **Lines 49-50:** "forms / of"
- **Lines 50-51:** "tide / beyond"
- **Lines 52-53:** "insomnia / of"
- **Lines 54-55:** "bright / and"
- **Lines 55-57:** "own / slow-burning / transitive"
- **Lines 58-59:** "spawn / and"
- **Lines 60-61:** "home / from"
- **Lines 61-62:** "fairgrounds / to"
- **Lines 63-64:** "alive / in"
- **Lines 64-65:** "world / and"
- **Lines 66-67:** "beach / sifting"
- **Lines 67-68:** "sand / and"
- **Lines 69-70:** "kite / plugged"

CAESURA

Caesura slows the reader down within lines, at times counteracting the incessant pull of enjambment throughout the poem. For instance, although lines 8-11 are enjambed, there is a brief pause in line 9 due to the comma after "jogging":

> jogging, or stopping to watch

The caesura mirrors the way that people abruptly stop what they're doing to look up at the "war planes" flying past.

There are also multiple caesurae in the second-to-last line of the poem:

> patient; be afraid; but still, through everything

Here, the abundance of caesurae creates a halting, hesitant rhythm that evokes the fear and trepidation of living in such violent times. Yet the many pauses also suggest the importance of slowing down and appreciating each and every moment as it happens. The caesurae grant the reader a chance to prepare for that act of attention, as though taking a deep breath.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 9:** "jogging, or"
- **Line 13:** "mind, and"
- **Line 21:** "shells; shreds"
- **Line 41:** "everything—the"
- **Line 47:** "happens: shifts"
- **Line 49:** "quiet, local"
- **Line 50:** "history: the"
- **Line 63:** "problem: how"
- **Line 72:** "patient; be," "afraid; but," "still, through"

ALLITERATION

Alliteration (as well as occasional assonance and consonance) adds lyricism to the poem's language and intensifies some of its important images. The soft alliteration of "sand spinning" in line 2, for example, might help conjure the smooth, s-shaped patterns left in the sand by the ebbing tide. By contrast, the harsher /g/ alliteration in the next two lines ("gasoline," "gusting," "golf") helps to convey the strength of the unpleasant petrol fumes wafting across the beach.

In a similar manner, the muted /m/ alliteration of lines 13-24 evokes the low hum of worry distracting the speaker from the moment he's sharing with his family:

> —with the news in my mind, and the muffled dread
> of what may come—

(Note that "come" adds to the effect and is an example of consonance.) Later, the rush of /s/ and /sh/ sounds in lines 21-22 suggests the splash and spray of the waves in the background:

> snail shells; shreds of razorfish;
> smudges of weed and flesh on tideworn stone.

Again, broader consonance (this time, sibilance in particular) is present as well: "razorfish," "flesh." The poem simply *sounds* like the beach.

In lines 52-54, there is /c/ and /p/ alliteration ("carp," "captive,"

"public parks") as well as /ah/ assonance ("long insomnia"), /p/ consonance ("carp," "captive"), and /ar/ assonance/consonance ("carp," "parks"). The combination of all these sounds evokes the beauty of these decorative fish, beauty which has resulted in them being contained in small spaces for public viewing.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "sand," "spinning"
- **Line 4:** "gasoline," "gusting"
- **Line 5:** "golf"
- **Line 13:** "my," "mind," "muffled"
- **Line 14:** "may"
- **Line 21:** "snail," "shells," "shreds"
- **Line 22:** "smudges," "stone"
- **Line 25:** "world," "we"
- **Line 26:** "what," "we"
- **Line 41:** "sea," "sky"
- **Line 53:** "carp," "public," "parks"
- **Line 54:** "captive"
- **Line 58:** "spawn"
- **Line 59:** "sticklebacks"
- **Line 67:** "sifting," "wood," "weed," "sand"
- **Line 68:** "puzzled," "pattern"
- **Line 70:** "plugged"
- **Line 72:** "patient"

ALLUSION

An epigraph situates the poem in a very specific moment in time: "September 2001." This, along with the mention of "the news" and "war planes," lets readers know that the poem is responding, at least in part, to 9/11. This was a series of four coordinated terrorist attacks committed by members of al-Qaeda, an extremist Islamic organization, against the United States on September 11, 2001. Terrorists hijacked four planes, flying two into New York City's World Trade Center (a.k.a. the Twin Towers) and another into the Pentagon; the fourth plane crashed in a field following a passenger revolt.

September 11 was the deadliest terror attack in modern history, resulting in the deaths of nearly 3,000 people. The events shook the globe, with images of the Twin Towers' collapse being played repeatedly on news stations all across the world. Many feared further attacks as well as an escalation into all-out war. Indeed, less than two weeks after 9/11, American president George W. Bush declared a global "war on terror," which led to numerous protracted and deadly conflicts in the Middle East.

The allusions to 9/11 cast a dark shadow over the poem and put its events into perspective. Though the speaker is in Scotland, an ocean away from the U.S., he like many others is shaken by attacks and fearful of "what may come" next. His "muffled dread" makes sense in light of the attacks, as does his "fear / of losing everything."

At the same time, the shadow of this world-changing historical event prompts the speaker to consider other forms of "history"—including the "quiet, local" tragedies and triumphs that fill people's lives and yet they often overlook.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Before Line 1:** "St Andrews: West Sands; September 2001"
- **Lines 9-11:** "or stopping to watch / as the war planes cambered and turned / in the morning light—"
- **Line 13:** "the news"

REPETITION

The first and second stanzas of "History" begin with the word "Today," creating subtle anaphora:

> Today
> as we flew the kites
> [...]
> today
> —with the news in my mind, and the muffled dread

Both "todays" are actually part of the same sprawling sentence begun in line 1, which doesn't reach its conclusion until line 22. That first "today" grounds the poem firmly in the speaker's present. After 10 lines of digression, the "today" at the start of the second stanza returns to that present, as though the speaker is trying to get himself back on track, to return to his surroundings rather than get distracted by the vast, historical events happening across the world.

Repetition has a similarly grounding effect throughout the poem. Take the anaphora of lines 28-29:

> **our** lines raised in the wind
> **our** bodies fixed and anchored to the shore

Here, the repetition of "our" highlights the contrast between "our lines" and "our bodies." The speaker is planted on the earth, but the "lines" of his kite (which might symbolize his imagination and/or his ties to the rest of humanity) extend well beyond his physical boundaries.

There is also diacope in lines 44-46:

> we **scarcely** register the drift and tug
> of other bodies
> **scarcely** apprehend

Repeating this word emphasizes just how little people tend to notice the world directly in front of them.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Today"
- **Line 12:** "today"
- **Line 28:** "our"
- **Line 29:** "our"
- **Line 43:** "we"
- **Line 44:** "we," "scarcely"
- **Line 46:** "scarcely"
- **Line 48:** "and"
- **Line 49:** "and"

VOCABULARY

St Andrews: West Sands (Before Line 1) - A beach in Scotland.

Leuchars (Line 4) - A town in Scotland known for its air force base.

Golf links (Lines 4-5) - That is, the golf course.

Gusting (Lines 4-5) - Blowing strongly.

Quail-grey (Lines 6-7) - The speaker is saying the tide is the color of a quail, kind of bird.

Cambered (Line 10) - Arched upward.

The news (Line 13) - Based on the epigraph at the beginning of the poem, it's safe to assume "the news" is an allusion to the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001.

Driftwork (Lines 19-20) - The speaker is describing the washed up remnants of ocean life.

Razorfish (Line 21) - A small, transparent fish. Sometimes used to refer to a razor shell clam, which is a kind of mollusk.

Smudges (Line 22) - Marks or stains.

Tideworn (Line 22) - Made smooth by the churning of the tide.

Kinship (Lines 23-24) - That is, blood relationship.

Silt (Lines 34-35) - Very small particles of sediment.

Petrol blue (Lines 36-37) - The dark, grayish blue with tints of green.

Estuaries (Line 42) - Where streams or rivers empty into the ocean.

Register (Lines 44-45) - Notice.

Scarcely apprehend (Lines 46-47) - Barely understand or grasp.

Ornamental carp (Lines 52-53) - A variety of freshwater fish with colorful markings.

Transitive gold (Lines 55-57) - The speaker is describing the carp's colorful markings, which change over time.

Jamjars of spawn (Line 58) - Emptied jars of preserves filled with fish eggs.

Sticklebacks (Lines 58-59) - A kind of fish.

Dune slacks (Line 69) - Wetland depressions in between mounds of sand or sediment along the coast.

Irredeemable (Line 73) - That which can't be saved or recovered.

Attentive (Line 73) - Watchful; paying close attention.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"History" has a highly unusual form. Its 73 lines are broken into 9 stanzas of vastly different lengths (the shortest stanza is 2 lines long, while the longest is 23). Lines also vary widely in length, with some consisting of a single word. The poem also uses a great deal of white space: many of its lines are indented, often beginning halfway across the page. This pulls readers' eyes back and forth, perhaps mimicking the way the speaker and his son survey the beach for "evidence of life." The poem's shifting appearance might further evoke the speaker's uncertainty about the future as well as the sensation of being tugged between two realities: the speaker is pulled between his immediate surroundings on the beach and the world of "the news" that fills his "mind." He's trying to remain present with his son but can't entirely ignore the "muffled dread of what may come."

METER

"History" starts out in free verse. Its lines vary in length and sound contemporary and conversational rather than rigidly controlled. Frequent indentation pulls the reader's eye back and forth across the page, perhaps evoking the movement of the tides or the way the speaker's awareness shifts from his immediate surroundings on the beach to the attacks happening across the ocean.

Starting with the fourth stanza, however, the poem slips into a relatively steady iambic pentameter: a meter in which lines contain 10 syllables that follow an unstressed-stressed pattern (da-DUM). Here are lines 23-25 as an example:

> At times | I think | what makes | us who | we are
> is nei- | ther kin- | ship nor | our giv- | en states
> but some- | thing lost | between | the world | we own

Iambic pentameter is arguably the most familiar meter in English-language poetry, known for the way it mimics the natural cadences of English speech and famously used by William Shakespeare in his poetry and plays. It thus feels like a very appropriate meter for a poem titled "History": the meter connects this contemporary poem to deep literary tradition, elevating its language and suggesting that the image of a child playing in the sand or flying a kite is no less a piece of "history"

than anything else. The steadiness of that iambic meter also creates a musical, predictable rhythm in the poem's second half as the speaker philosophizes about humanity, connection, and nature.

Note that the poet often breaks lines of iambic pentameter into two parts, as in lines 65-66:

> and do | no harm
> a tod- | dler on | a beach

There's in fact a stanza break between these lines, but, thanks to enjambment, they read aloud like a single line of iambic pentameter. The poem's meter adds sonic cohesion and consistency to the poem; at the same time, the use of white space like this keeps the poem from feeling stiff or rigid. It also draws the poem out, encouraging readers to really take their time and consider each moment in the poem as it happens.

RHYME SCHEME

"History" doesn't use a rhyme scheme, instead turning to subtler alliteration and assonance to add pops of musicality and sonic interest. The *lack* of a steady rhyme scheme keeps the poem sounding both contemporary and conversational rather than performative.

SPEAKER

Readers can assume that the speaker of "History" is John Burnside himself, given that he mentions his son "Lucas" and the poem takes place in his home country of Scotland. The speaker thus isn't necessarily *directly* impacted by the 9/11 terrorist attacks that inspired the poem, but he clearly still grapples with the fear and uncertainty of living in a violent, increasingly "virtual" world. He is flying kites with his son but part of his mind is elsewhere, distracted by "the news" of the attacks as well as by "the muffled dread / of what may come." At the same time, he believes it's his responsibility to be "patient" and "attentive" to his immediate surroundings. He seeks to counterbalance his fear and anxiety by embracing the present moment with his son and by appreciating and safe-guarding the "gazed-upon and cherished world" right in front of him.

SETTING

The poem establishes its setting right up top: it takes place on West Sands beach in St. Andrews, a seaside town in Scotland, in September of 2001. The 9/11 terrorist attacks on the United States thus lurk in the background of the poem. These attacks killed nearly 3,000 people and remain the deadliest in world history.

The speaker repeats that the events of the poem are happening "today," grounding himself in the present. It's not clear if the poem actually takes place on 9/11 itself or a few days after the attacks; either way, the "news" has clearly shaken the world, sending waves of "muffled dread" across an ocean. The speaker and his family are flying "kites" on the beach but can smell "gasoline" wafting over from the nearby town of "Leuchars," known for its Royal Air Force base. People stop their walks and jobs along the beach to look up as "war planes" soar past, and there is a muted yet palpable sense of anxiety about what's going to happen next.

The speaker and his son, Lucas, are combing the beach for washed-up shells and pebbles, "finding evidence of life" among the "driftwork." Distracted by the looming threat of violence and chaos, the speaker tries to remain attuned to "the quiet, local forms / of history" happening all around him. This means paying attention to things like the "fish lodged in the tide" and subtle "shifts of light / and weather." Appreciating "the moment as it happens," the poem suggests, is one way to exist in an increasingly violent, volatile world.

The poem then ends with the speaker juxtaposing the image of his child sorting through "wood and dried weed" on the beach with that of his parents, who hold a kite that's "plugged into the sky." The imagery suggests two very different ways of dealing with fear, danger, and uncertainty. The parents are "plugged" in, their attention turned up and away from the beach; the toddler, meanwhile, is fully absorbed in what's in front of him.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

John Burnside is one of Scotland's most prolific and awarded writers, having published 20 books of poetry, 11 novels, and various nonfiction books8. Burnside's influences include the writers Herman Melville, Marcel Proust, Nathanael West, and Don DeLillo (who also famously wrote about 9/11 in his 2001 essay *In the Ruins of the Future* and his 2007 novel *Falling Man*).

Burnside published "History" in 2002 in his ninth book of poems, *The Light Trap*. The poems in this collection deal primarily with humanity's perceptions of and relationship to the natural world. In this way, Burnside picks up the mantel of 19th-century Romantic poets such as William Wordsworth, Transcendentalist writers such as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, and more modern, nature-focused poets like Robert Frost.

There have also been many literary responses to the events of 9/11. For example, British poet Simon Armitage inhabits the voice of an English trader trapped in the World Trade Center in his "Out of the Blue" sequence.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

On September 11, 2001, the Islamist extremist network al-

Qaeda launched four coordinated terrorist attacks on the United States. Terrorists hijacked four planes, deliberately crashing two into New York City's World Trade Center (a.k.a, the Twin Towers) and one into the Pentagon (the headquarters of the U.S. Department of Defense); the fourth plane crashed into a field in Pennsylvania following a fight with passengers on board. Nearly 3,000 people, hailing from 102 countries, were killed.

Burnside's poem alludes to the attacks without mentioning them directly, instead noting only that the poem takes place in "September 2001" and that the speaker is preoccupied with "the news" and a "muffled dread / of what may come."

"History" also nods to deepening ecological concerns. By 2002, when "History" was published, the consequences of global warming were becoming abundantly clear. Burnside is a proponent of "deep ecology," a philosophy that argues for the innate value of all living things regardless of whether they're considered useful for human purposes. This outlook informs the poem's call to exist in "this gazed upon and cherished world / and do no harm."

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Poem Out Loud — Listen to a reading of "History." (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S1qxM8PL-hk)
- The Poet's Life and Work — A biography of Burnside from the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/john-burnside)
- A Light Trap — Jonathan Bate reviews Burnside's ninth poetry collection, in which "History" was published, for the Guardian. (https://www.theguardian.com/books/2002/nov/23/featuresreviews.guardianreview8)
- 9/11 FAQs — Learn more about the attacks to which Burnside's poem alludes in this FAQ sheet from the 9/11 Memorial and Museum. (https://www.911memorial.org/911-faqs)

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