

I Ask My Mother to Sing



SUMMARY

The speaker says that their mother starts to sing, and soon their grandmother begins to sing as well. They sing as if they were young children again. The speaker thinks that if their father were still with them, he would join in with his accordion, his body gently rocking back and forth like a boat swaying on water.

The speaker hasn't ever been to the places described in the song: the capital of China or the Summer Palace. The speaker hasn't entered the Stone Boat, a boat-shaped pavilion on a lake within the Summer Palace, as the rain starts falling and the people picnicking out on the grass run off in search of cover.

Nonetheless, the speaker still loves hearing their family sing about these places. They can envision the way the waterlilies overflow with rain that tips them over so that the rainwater spills over into the lake. The waterlilies then bob back upright to fill up with rain again.

The speaker says that both their mother and grandmother have started weeping, but that doesn't stop them from singing.

mother and grandmother "sing like young girls," this implies that this music brings the past to life. The speaker has "never been in Peking, or the Summer Palace," nor have they "stood on the great Stone Boat to watch / the rain begin on Kuen Ming Lake." But although they aren't familiar with the places the song describes, the speaker says they "love to hear it [the song] sung." Simply hearing the song's descriptions of these places is enough to connect them to the world of their ancestors and help the speaker understand their own history a little better.

The poem thus illustrates the power art has to preserve the past and bring people together. The speaker describes a scene from the song where "waterlilies fill with rain until / they overturn, spilling water into water." When they are emptied of rain, the waterlilies "rock back, and fill with more." This imagery suggests that, like rain pouring into the open waterlilies, this song "fill[s]" the speaker's family with memories of the past. And though these memories make the mother and grandmother "cry," they both keep singing. Although some of these memories may be painful, they are also incredibly precious; while reliving them, the speaker's family feels connected and whole, their past alive and present.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-12



THEMES



ART, TRADITION, AND MEMORY

"I Ask My Mother to Sing" illustrates the power of song to connect people to each other and to the past.

As the speaker's mother and grandmother "sing like young girls," the music seems to transport the women to the China of their youth. And as the speaker listens to their elders sing, they, too, are able to envision this China—despite never having been there. The song thus puts the speaker in touch with places and traditions they've never personally witnessed but which are nonetheless parts of their family's identity. In this way, the poem suggests the importance of art as a method of remembering and connecting to one's past.

The poem's title suggests that the speaker has heard their mother sing this song before—that this is a kind of ritual that helps bring generations together and preserve family memory. Indeed, as soon as the speaker's mother begins to sing, the speaker's "grandmother joins her." The speaker also imagines that "If [their] father were alive, he would play / his accordion and sway like a boat." The song is not simply comforting because it's familiar, but also because it brings the family together and connects them to those they've lost.

The song also connects the speaker and their family members to their cultural history. When the speaker says that their



THE PAIN OF EXILE

"I Asked My Mother to Sing" is inspired by Li-Young Lee's own life: the poet's parents were Chinese exiles

living in Indonesia, who later had to flee Indonesia to escape anti-Chinese prejudice. Read with this context in mind, the poem captures the pain of exile and longing for a homeland to which one can't return.

The song the speaker asks their mother to sing isn't just *any* song—it's one clearly connected to the family's ancestral land, China. The song describes "Peking" (i.e., Beijing, the capital of China) and "the Summer Palace" (an imperial garden in Beijing). Although the speaker themselves has never actually been to the places mentioned in the song, these places are clearly significant to the family—another reason why the speaker "love[s] to hear it sung." The speaker's elders perhaps even once "stood on the great Stone Boat to watch / the rain begin on Kuen Ming Lake" (located in the Summer Palace).

The song transports the speaker's mother and grandmother back to their home country. That the women sing like young girls suggests that China is still vivid in their minds; their memories haven't faded, and they sing together as a way of feeling connected to a place they can no longer visit in person.

Of course, the song is also a reminder of the fact that they're now far away from this place. The fact that singing makes the women cry implies that they miss this land deeply and long to see it again. The fact that they don't *stop* singing, meanwhile, suggests that the memories are worth it—that the pain of homesickness is preferable to forgetting where they came from.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Line 2
- Lines 5-8
- Lines 13-14



LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

*She begins, and ...
... like a boat.*

"I Ask My Mother to Sing" opens in the middle of the action:

She begins, and my grandmother joins her.

Based on the poem's title, readers can assume that what the speaker's mother "begins" is to sing, in response to the speaker's request. The poem immediately feels straightforward and conversational, thanks to its clear, simple language and two [end-stopped](#) lines in a row.

The speaker says that the women "sing like young girls," a [simile](#) that conveys the joy this song brings; the women seem more innocent and light-hearted. Perhaps this is a song from their youth, and singing it transports them back to their childhood. Perhaps this song is one that has been passed down from generation to generation.

The poem's next two lines imply that singing this song is a kind of family ritual: the speaker says that if their father were still alive, he would join right in with "his accordion and sway like a boat." In other words, he'd rock back and forth like a boat on a gentle sea, a serene image that suggests that the speaker takes comfort in this family tradition. The song connects the speaker's elders to their past, and, in bringing up memories of the speaker's father, it also connects the family to people they've lost.

By now, readers get a sense of the poem's form. This stanza has four lines, making it a [quatrain](#), and is written in [free verse](#). Instead of following a set [meter](#) or [rhyme scheme](#), it uses natural rhythms to create a casual yet intimate [tone](#).

LINES 5-8

*I've never been ...
... in the grass.*

In the second stanza, the speaker describes what the song itself is about: "Peking" (the capital of China, now called Beijing) "and the Summer Palace" (a collection of imperial gardens, lakes, and palaces built by the Qing dynasty). The song also mentions "the great Stone Boat," which refers to a marble pavilion that's shaped like a boat and which is located on "Kuen Ming Lake," a giant, artificial lake that makes up a huge part of the Summer Palace.

The speaker says that they themselves have "never been" to the places described in the song. The clear [imagery](#) of these lines, however, suggests that the song nevertheless creates a vivid *sensation* of these places. The speaker, and the reader, can picture the scene: people picnicking near the lake, and then scampering off when rain starts to fall.

The [enjambment](#) of this stanza creates a sudden burst of momentum, evoking how the song seems to carry the speaker away, across time and place:

[...] to watch
the rain begin on Kuen Ming Lake, the picnickers
running away in the grass.

It's as though the speaker is momentarily transported to the China of their elders' youth.

The sonic devices in these lines fill them with music and intensity as well. Listen, for example, to the crisp [alliteration](#) of "Peking"/"Palace" and "stood"/"Stone," the [assonance](#) of "Stone Boat," and the [sibilance](#) "Summer Palace." This heightened language emphasizes the beauty and significance of the places mentioned in the song.

It's worth taking a beat to mention Li-Young Lee's own relationship to China here, as the poem is referencing his personal history. Lee's parents were Chinese political exiles; they lived in Indonesia for a while but had to leave due to rising anti-Chinese sentiment. They eventually settled in the United States, where Lee was raised.

With this context in mind, it seems likely that the speaker of this poem is a version of Lee himself. In any case, listening to their mother and grandmother sing about these places in China, the speaker connects to family history that they otherwise wouldn't have access to.

LINES 9-12

*But I love ...
... fill with more.*

The speaker says that although they've never been to the places described in the song, they "love to hear it sung." This is in part because the song is a comforting family ritual, an activity that helps the speaker feel connected to their mother, grandmother, and late father.

The peaceful waterlily [imagery](#) in lines 10-12 also suggests that

there's something soothing and nourishing about hearing this song. In these lines, the speaker might still be describing what the song about. That is, the description of the "waterlilies" might be referring to the waterlilies growing in "Kuen Ming Lake," filling with the very "rain" that drove the "picnickers" away.

But these waterlilies might also [symbolize](#) the song itself, or the experience of hearing "it sung." Perhaps the way the rain fills the waterlilies mirrors the way the song fills the mother and grandmother with memories; the mother and grandmother, like the waterlilies, then turn and "spill" out those memories in the sense that they share them with the speaker.

These lines are thick with [consonance](#) and [assonance](#) that evoke the loveliness of the imagery at hand. Fluid /l/ sounds convey the smooth flow of water, while flitting /t/ and short /i/ sounds make the image seem gentle and delicate:

how the waterlilies fill with rain until
they overturn, spilling water into water,
then rock back, and fill with more.

Note, too, how the [caesurae](#) in lines 11 and 12 (the commas after "overturn" and "back") subtly evoke the rocking motion of the waterlilies, bringing the reader to a gentle pause again and again. This rocking motion also recalls the way the speaker's father would "sway like a boat."

LINES 13-14

*Both women have ...
... stops her song.*

So far, the poem's stanzas have had four lines apiece (they're [quatrains](#)). But the poem ends with a two-line stanza (a [couplet](#)), the shorter length and firmly [end-stopped](#) lines making the poem's final moments feel quite emphatic:

Both women have begun to cry.
But neither stops her song.

The speaker doesn't end the poem on by focusing on their *own* feelings; instead, they focus on their mother and grandmother and the emotions that seem to overwhelm them as they sing their song. Like the "waterlilies" from the previous stanza, these women seem to be "spilling" over with memory and emotion. Their tears suggest the grief of being so far from their homeland, a place the poem implies they loved and long for deeply. Yet both women continue to sing, suggesting that while these memories are painful, they're also treasured. Through the song, they're able to momentarily reconnect with a place that meant so much to them.

Ending with poem with the word "song" also he emphasizes the importance of art as a means of remembering and connecting to the past. This song acts as a bridge between past and

present, between generations of the speaker's family, and between the living and the dead.



SYMBOLS



WATER

In the poem, water [symbolizes](#) the connection between the past and present. Every stanza in the poem references water in some way. In the first stanza, the speaker says that their father would "sway like a boat" while playing his accordion. Next, the speaker envisions rain falling on "Kuen Ming Lake." In the third stanza, this rain fills up "waterlilies" until they tip over, "spilling water into water" (i.e., pouring rainwater into the water of the lake). And finally, the speaker mentions their mother and grandmother crying as they sing.

Both the song and the poem about the song thus repeatedly focus on water. Water, of course, is a liquid, a substance that moves fluidly. All this water-related [imagery](#), in turn, suggests that there's a fluid link between the family's past and the present. There's no clear break between the past and present; instead, the speaker's family's memories flow into the present like a steady stream or a trickle of rain.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-4:** "he would play / his accordion and sway like a boat."
- **Lines 7-8:** "the rain begin on Kuen Ming Lake, the picnickers / running away in the grass."
- **Lines 10-13:** "how the waterlilies fill with rain until / they overturn, spilling water into water, / then rock back, and fill with more. / Both women have begun to cry."



POETIC DEVICES

SIMILE

The poem uses two [similes](#) in the first stanza to help set the scene.

In line 2, the speaker says that "Mother and daughter sing like young girls." Comparing these women to "young girls" suggests that the song connects them to their childhood—and, presumably, to a time before they experienced the pain of having to leave behind their homeland. The song also makes them appear young and full of hope again, even if only momentarily. The simile might also suggest that the song they sing is one that has been passed down from generation to generation, a song each of them knows from their own childhood.

The speaker uses another simile in lines 3-5, saying that if their father hadn't died, he would join in: "he would play / his accordion and sway like a boat." This simile paints a picture that is easy for the reader to imagine: the gentle movement of a "boat" rocking back and forth on the water evokes feelings of calm and tranquility. Though the speaker's father is no longer alive, the song makes the speaker imagine his presence.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "Mother and daughter sing like young girls."
- **Lines 3-4:** "he would play / his accordion and sway like a boat."

IMAGERY

The poem's [imagery](#) helps the reader see (and feel) what the speaker experiences as their family sings.

In lines 3-4, the speaker uses a [simile](#) to compare their father "play[ing]/ his accordion" to a "boat [swaying]" on the water. This imagery is gentle, suggesting that the speaker's memory of their father is a fond one.

In lines 6-8, the poem depicts what the song itself is describing: picnickers by a lake at China's Summer Palace getting caught in the rain and "running away in the grass." The speaker hasn't experienced this themselves, but the imagery is clear and vivid. The poem implies that through listening to the song, the speaker is able to imagine themselves in the scene.

The imagery of waterlilies in the next stanza filling with rain and tipping over is again gentle and serene, evoking the comfort the speaker feels upon hearing this song. This imagery also feels [symbolic](#), suggesting the way that the song itself "fill[s]" those singing/hearing it with memories, emotion, etc. Just as the waterlilies "spill[] water into water," the mother and grandmother seem to be "spilling" their memories of home into the speaker when they cry in the next stanza.

The [diacope](#) in this stanza (the [repetition](#) of "fill" and "water") makes the imagery pop even more. The way the lilies overflow and then "fill" up again also reflects the nature of memory itself: it fills the women with emotions that eventually must spill from their eyes. Still, "neither stops her song"—instead, they, like the lilies, just "rock back, and fill with more."

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-4:** "he would play / his accordion and sway like a boat."
- **Lines 6-8:** "nor stood on the great Stone Boat to watch / the rain begin on Kuen Ming Lake, the picnickers / running away in the grass."
- **Lines 10-12:** "how the waterlilies fill with rain until / they overturn, spilling water into water, / then rock back, and fill with more."

END-STOPPED LINE

Most of the poem's 14 lines are [end-stopped](#), which creates a steady, contemplative [tone](#). The poem's opening and closing lines are firmly end-stopped, for example, each closing with a period:

She begins, and my grandmother joins her.
Mother and daughter sing like young girls.
[...]
Both women have begun to cry.
But neither stops her song.

The poem feels matter-of-fact and straightforward. The final two lines feel especially simple, short, and emphatic.

In contrast, notice how the second stanza contains two enjambed lines in a row:

nor stood on the great Stone Boat to watch
the rain begin on Kuen Ming Lake, the picnickers
running away in the grass.

This lends the stanza a little momentum, emphasizing the way that the speaker is being swept up in the world of the song.

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "her."
- **Line 2:** "girls."
- **Line 4:** "boat."
- **Line 5:** "Palace,"
- **Line 8:** "grass."
- **Line 9:** "sung;"
- **Line 11:** "water,"
- **Line 12:** "more."
- **Line 13:** "cry."
- **Line 14:** "song."

CONSONANCE

[Consonance](#) (as well as the related devices [alliteration](#) and [sibilance](#)) adds gentle rhythm and music to the poem, helping bring its soothing [imagery](#) to life.

In the second stanza, for example, listen to the popping /p/ sounds of "Peking" and "Palace," the /st/ of "stood" and "stone," and the crisp /k/ sounds of "Kuen," "Lake," and "picnickers." This heightened language emphasizes the beauty of the places the song is describing.

There's even more consonance in the following stanza, particularly of the smooth /l/ sound. Not coincidentally, the imagery describes waterlilies overflowing with water. The liquid /il/ sounds evoke the fluid nature of both "water" and memory:

how the waterlilies fill with rain until
they overturn, spilling water into water,
then rock back, and fill with more.

Note the string of [assonance](#) here as well: "waterlilies fill with," until," "spilling," "into." The rich sounds of these lines make their imagery all the more visceral and immediate.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "Peking," "Summer Palace"
- **Line 6:** "stood," "Stone"
- **Line 7:** "Kuen," "Lake," "picnickers"
- **Line 10:** "waterlilies fill," "until"
- **Line 11:** "overturn," "spilling"
- **Line 12:** "rock back," "fill"
- **Line 13:** "Both," "begun"
- **Line 14:** "But," "stops," "song"



VOCABULARY

Accordion (Lines 3-4) - A kind musical instrument.

Peking (Line 5) - A previous name for Beijing, China's capital.

The Summer Palace (Line 5) - A group of lakes, palaces, and gardens in Beijing.

The great Stone Boat (Line 6) - A marble pavilion shaped like a boat and located on the northwestern shore of Kunming Lake in Beijing.

Kuen Ming Lake (Line 7) - Also known as Kunming Lake, this artificial lake comprises three-quarters of China's Summer Palace.



FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"I Ask My Mother to Sing" consists of 14 lines broken into three [quatrains](#) (or four-line stanzas) and a concluding [couplet](#).

The poem's form thus echoes that of a Shakespearean [sonnet](#), which also contains three quatrains followed by a couplet. Setting the final two lines apart from the rest of the poem makes them stand out to readers, who are left with the powerful image of the speaker's mother and grandmother singing through their tears.

Unlike a traditional sonnet, however, "I Ask My Mother to Sing" doesn't follow any set [meter](#) or [rhyme scheme](#). As a result, the poem feels at once traditional and contemporary. In a way, it melds the present and the past—much like the song the speaker's mother sings.

METER

"I Ask My Mother to Sing" is a [free verse](#) poem, meaning it doesn't follow a set [meter](#). This keeps its language feeling conversational and intimate.

The lack of meter is also interesting in light of the fact that the poem resembles a [sonnet](#) (it has 14 lines broken into three [quatrains](#) and a [couplet](#)). By putting a contemporary spin on a very traditional form, the poet joins the old with the new—just as the mother's song connects various generations of the speaker's family.

RHYME SCHEME

As a [free verse](#) poem, "I Ask My Mother to Sing" does not use a [rhyme scheme](#). As with the poem's lack of [meter](#), not having a predictable rhyme scheme allows the poem to feel more modern and conversational. Much like the women singing about their homeland, the poem seems to *recall* the past but is located in the present.



SPEAKER

It's fair to assume that the speaker here is Lee himself. Although the poem isn't explicit about the speaker's family's relationship to "Peking" (a previous name for Beijing, the capital of China), it's clearly drawing from Lee's own history. The poem implies that the speaker is the child of Chinese immigrants longing for their homeland, with its "Summer Palace" and "Kuen Ming Lake." The speaker says that they have "never been to Peking"; they're physically cut off from this part of their history but able to experience their family's homeland secondhand through the "song" that their mother and grandmother sing.



SETTING

"I Ask My Mother to Sing" doesn't have a specific setting. As the title reveals, the speaker has asked their mother to sing; the poem itself begins as she begins her song.

The poem doesn't provide any additional detail about when or where this singing occurs, however. Instead, it focuses on the places described within this song: "Peking" (now called Beijing, the capital of China) and "the Summer Palace," a group of lakes, palaces, and gardens built by the Qing dynasty that rest in the heart of Beijing. The song depicts "the great Stone Boat" (a marble pavilion on Kuen Ming, or Kunming, Lake) and "rain" falling on "the picnickers" in the gardens. It also depicts "waterlilies fill[ing] with rain."

The poem's attention to a world the speaker has never seen, and which the speaker's family has left behind, adds to its poignant, nostalgic tone. Regardless of where the family is located in the present, these women are clearly longing for a place from their *past*.



CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

"I Ask My Mother to Sing" appeared in Li-Young Lee's first poetry collection, *Rose*, which was published in 1986. In the forward to the book, poet Gerald Stern (under whom Lee studied during his time at the University of Pittsburgh) praised the visionary nature of Lee's poems, which he compared to the likes of John Keats, Rainer Maria Rilke, and Theodore Roethke.

Lee's work is known for its lyricism and draws from the poet's Chinese heritage, his unique family history (more on that below), and his love for classical Chinese poets such as Li Bai (also known as Li Bo) and Du Fu (also known as Tu Fu). Lee has also [mentioned](#) the importance of socially "withdrawn" poets such as the aforementioned Rilke and the famously reclusive Emily Dickinson, whose greatness he sees as being a result of their willingness to "get out the [poem's] way so that something bigger" can communicate through their work.

Common themes in Lee's poetry include family, memory, consciousness, and religion. Some of these themes are apparent in "I Ask My Mother to Sing," which explores art as a means of passing down family and cultural memory.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Lee was born in Jakarta, Indonesia, in 1957. His parents were Chinese political exiles from influential families. Before moving to Indonesia, Lee's father had worked as a personal physician for Mao Zedong, the founder of the People's Republic of China. Lee's great-grandfather on his mother's side was Yuan Shikai, the first Republican president of China, who tried (and failed) to reinstate the hereditary monarchy and himself as emperor from 1915-1916.

The Lees eventually were forced to leave Indonesia due to increasing anti-Chinese sentiment. After passing through Hong Kong and Japan, they ended up settling in the United States. Lee [has spoken](#) about the obstacles his family faced upon first moving to the States, including continued xenophobia.

Lee's father studied at a seminary and moved the family to Pennsylvania where he took a job as a Presbyterian minister; seeing his father in this role undoubtedly influenced Lee, who has written extensively about both God and his complicated relationship with his father (in poems such as "[My Father, In Heaven, Is Reading Out Loud](#)" and "[Little Father](#)").

"I Ask My Mother to Sing" refers to Lee's family, though it isn't

explicit about the events that led up to his alienation from the homeland of his ancestors. Instead, the poem represents a more general immigrant experience, making it relatable to immigrants of various backgrounds.



MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- [Making Sense of His Family's Suffering](#) — An NPR episode in which Lee talks about his family's history, exile, and what it was like for his family when they came to the United States. (<https://www.npr.org/transcripts/87784720>)
- [The Summer Palace](#) — A World Heritage Journey episode on the Summer Palace. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TknmBq9HKNA>)
- [A Reading of the Poem](#) — Li-Young Lee introduces his poem and reads it out loud. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dOjar8hgA3Q>)
- [The Poet's Life and Work](#) — A biography of Lee from The Poetry Foundation. (<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/li-young-lee>)
- [A Conversation with Li-Young Lee](#) — An interview with the Los Angeles Review of Books in which Lee discusses how his first collection came about and the use of silence in his work. (<https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/a-conversation-with-li-young-lee/>)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER LI-YOUNG LEE POEMS

- [From Blossoms](#)



HOW TO CITE

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