Looking for a Cousin on a Swing

SUMMARY

At the age of four or five, a woman sat down on a communal swing, and her male cousin, who was then six or seven, sat down on the same swing. Each time the swing went this way or that, she sensed his body in a way that touched the very depths of her feeling.

When we were done, she recalled, we climbed a tree together. The tree wasn't huge, but it was very leafy, like a fig tree. And we explored our crush in a way that was quite innocent.

These days, she pursues the feeling she had on the swing through big, sprawling cities. And she tries to stay wholesome in her adult love life, too—not just on the branch of a tree so ripe, it seemed ready to grow red figs beneath every leaf if anyone so much as sneezed.

THEMES

THE INTENSITY OF FIRST LOVE

A. K. Ramanujan's "Looking for a Cousin on a Swing" contrasts a woman's memory of very young love with her adult quest to recapture that feeling. At age four or five, the woman sat on a swing with her slightly older cousin and felt the first stirrings of romance. Though their explorations were "very innocent," the woman has spent her adult life chasing that first feeling of love across various "cities." The poem implies that this effort, while romantic, is in some sense hopeless. Try as they might, adults can never fully regain the dramatic, "lunging" intensity of first love.

The poem illustrates, through one woman's experience, how childhood crushes can be both "innocent" and extremely intense. This woman remembers sitting on a swing with her cousin when "she was four or five" and he was "six or seven." Though the ages are blurry, the feeling behind the memory remains exceptionally vivid. Her crush on her cousin seems to touch her very heart: "the lunging pits / of her feeling." Later, the kids climb the tree and cuddle (or otherwise explore their crush) in a way the woman calls, as an adult, "very innocent." At the same time, the experience feels so overwhelmingly romantic that she recalls it in detail many years later.

In her adult love life, the woman tries to hold on to that "innocent" passion and wonder, but it no longer comes naturally—and no longer can, the poem suggests. These days, the woman "looks for the swing" in a metaphorical sense, "in cities with fifteen suburbs." That is, she's now a full-grown woman leading a cosmopolitan life, and she moves from big city to big city searching for the *feeling* she had on the swing. She's not actually searching for her cousin, of course, but she pursues love as if she's chasing that high she first felt as a kid. It's implied, though, that the startling newness of her childhood perceptions gave her experience an intensity that grown-up life can't match.

The poem celebrates that intensity even while mourning its passage. At the end, the narrator returns to the childhood memory of the tree, which seems to "burst" with passion and romantic possibility. There's a sense that, even if the woman can't recapture this experience, it was extraordinary and worth appreciating in its own right.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-23

INNOCENCE, EXPERIENCE, AND SEXUAL AWAKENING

The anecdote in "Looking for a Cousin on a Swing" links sexual awakening with the loss of what society calls "innocen[ce]." The excitement the woman and her cousin share as young children—climbing a tree and playing at romance—recalls the biblical myth of Eden. Like Adam and Eve losing innocence and paradise in one fell swoop (also due to an implied sexual awakening), the woman in the poem finds that her newfound awareness of desire represents the beginning of the end of her innocence. In this way, the poem suggests, first encounters with bodily desire are double-edged, mingling pleasure and discovery with pain and loss.

Initially, the poem frames the woman's sexual awakening as "innocent," a joyous discovery in a kind of childhood paradise. Her sudden desire for her cousin takes place in "a tree," which symbolically recalls the myth of Eden and the forbidden Tree of Knowledge. (She compares this tree to a "fig tree," perhaps evoking the forbidden fruit of the biblical tree.) She doesn't say what she and her cousin did, only that "we were very innocent / about it." While possibly forbidden by adults, their exploration was enjoyable and harmless.

Yet as soon as this innocence turns to experience and becomes self-conscious, it's lost. Like Adam and Eve eating from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil (also a metaphor about sexuality), the episode in the tree/swing marks the end of *total* innocence. Thereafter, no experience of desire will be quite as surprising and un-self-conscious. The woman now figuratively "looks for the swing" (seeks sex and romance) in various cities. In the process, she "tries to be innocent / about it"—"it" meaning love and sexuality. But the poem's language hints that there's an

unbridgeable gulf between "were very innocent" and "tries to be innocent." As soon as you have to *try*, you're in some sense doomed to fail!

In short, children are reflexively innocent in a way grown-ups can't be. The poem turns back to nostalgia at the end, as if suggesting that even a bright, sophisticated romantic future can't live up to the naive past.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-23

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

When she was ...
... himself against her;

In lines 1-4, the speaker begins telling a childhood anecdote recalled by an unnamed woman, referred to only as "she." The speaker serves as a third-person narrator whose relationship (if any) to the woman is unclear.

The poem's title is "Looking for a Cousin on a Swing," and these opening lines introduce both cousin and swing—as well as the woman herself, who turns out to be the one doing the "Looking." But the looking doesn't come until many years later. In the woman's anecdote, she and her cousin are together as children, physically touching. The speaker sets the scene in lines full of alliteration:

> When she was four or five
> she sat on a village swing
> and her cousin, six or seven,
> sat himself against her;

These gentle /f/, /s/, and /h/ sounds create a pleasing music, appropriate to a happy childhood memory. To the woman, in fact, this memory is not just happy but thrilling. When she was very young (so young that this is clearly a *formative* memory), her slightly older, male cousin "sat himself against her" on the swing.

In this context, "sat himself against her" sounds a little more intimate than *sat down beside, next to*, etc. It's not clear exactly how the two were positioned on the swing, but clearly, there was a sense of closeness that the woman (then a girl) remembers many years later.

"Village swing" refers to a communal, recreational swing—either a tree swing or a free-standing structure—used by children in a small town. (And not necessarily just children!) Such swings still exist in villages in some parts of the world, but they're not as common as they once were. The scene therefore has a somewhat quaint, old-fashioned flavor, which aligns with the poem's nostalgic mood.

LINES 5-8

with every lunge ...
... of her feeling;

In lines 5-8, the emotional intensity escalates. While sitting on a swing with her cousin as a child, the woman felt the first stirrings of romantic attraction, perhaps even a kind of sexual awakening.

Of course, this will be an eyebrow-raising scenario for many readers, but the poem treats it in a matter-of-fact way, leaving readers to judge how problematic or innocent it seems. In fact, "innocent" will be the most crucial and ambiguous word in the poem. (Note that views about cousin-to-cousin relationships have varied widely across times and cultures, and that it's unclear, here, just how closely these two are related—whether they're first cousins, third cousins, etc. Remember, the setting here is a "village," a tiny and perhaps isolated town where *many* residents might be related in one way or another!)

The poem doesn't mention attraction or desire explicitly. Instead, it conveys these things through metaphor:

> with every lunge of the swing
> she felt him
> in the lunging pits
> of her feeling;

In other words, the thrill of swinging back and forth became inseparable from the thrill of sitting "against" her cousin. The giddy, stomach-dropping sensation of flying into the air merged with the stomach-dropping sensation of romantic desire. The physical "lung[ing]" of the swing mirrored, or heightened, the yearning she experienced in the "pits / of her feeling" (compare the idiom "the pit of the stomach").

The poet's figurative language compresses all these ideas together in a surprising, vivid, yet indirect way, *evoking* rather than *defining* a feeling that was likely hard to define for the girl herself. Notice also how the flexibility of the poem's free verse contributes to this moment. At only three syllables, "she felt him" (line 6) is one of the shortest lines in the poem, and seems especially short by contrast with the seven-syllable line before it. Because they carry the weight of their own line, these three monosyllabic words sound punchy and emphatic, conveying the intensity of what the girl "felt."

LINES 9-14

and afterwards ...
... about it.

Lines 9-14 describe the girl and her cousin hopping off the swing to "climb[] a tree." There's a small but important detail here about the narrative framing: the words "she said" (line 10)

make clear that the girl has grown up and is now telling this anecdote as an adult woman.

The woman doesn't say—perhaps she doesn't know or remember—what kind of tree she and her cousin climbed, but it was "not very tall," and "full of leaves / like those of a fig tree." In other words, it was short but full of vibrant life, much like the young characters themselves. The lightly tripping alliteration of "tall"/"tree," "full"/"fig," and "leaves / like" once again gives the language a pleasing, musical quality.

And this quality fits the mood, since the memory is a happy one. The woman withholds details about what she and her cousin did in the tree together, but clearly, it felt exciting and romantic in a naive, early-childhood sort of way. Whatever it was, "we were very innocent / about it," as she delicately explains.

The combination of the fig-like tree, the male-female pairing, and the word "innocent" suggests a possible allusion hovering in the background. These elements are strongly reminiscent of the Garden of Eden myth, versions of which appear in all the Abrahamic faith traditions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam). In this story, Adam and Eve defy God's will by eating fruit from the Tree of Knowledge (a.k.a. the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil). In popular culture, this fruit is often identified as an apple, but according to some sources/tellings, it's a fig! Regardless, the tasting of the forbidden fruit is a metaphor for sex (carnal knowledge), and the act gets Adam and Eve kicked out of paradise (in what's known as the Fall of Man).

By subtly invoking this story, the poem draws an implied parallel between the innocence of Eve and Adam (pre-Fall) and the childhood innocence of the woman and her cousin. The two cousins' joyful play seems to occur in a lush, idyllic, secluded setting—a kind of childhood paradise. But it prompts the first stirrings of what will someday become their adult sexuality, so while it's "very innocent," it foreshadows their future, mature experience (or *loss* of innocence).

LINES 15-18

Now she looks ...
... about it

In lines 15-18, the poem juxtaposes the idyllic scene from the woman's childhood (swing, tree, cousin, etc.) with her adult experience. More specifically, it juxtaposes the crush she once had on her cousin with the way she lives and pursues love now.

These days, according to the speaker, the woman "looks for the swing" in a metaphorical sense. That is, she searches for the romantic *feeling* she had on the swing. She now chases this feeling "in cities with fifteen suburbs": that is, not in a small "village" but in sprawling, cosmopolitan cities.

It's not clear exactly what her love life is like: whether she's actively dating, holding off on dating while looking for The One, etc. But she's not literally looking for her *cousin*, of course—she's long outgrown those awkward, early-childhood explorations. She simply misses and wants to recapture that first thrill of infatuation.

In the process, she "tries to be innocent / about it." Notice how this stanza ends by repeating the three words that closed the previous stanza:

> Now she looks for the swing
> in cities with fifteen suburbs
> and tries to be innocent
> about it

Likewise, there's another enjambment between "innocent" and "about," which places particular emphasis on the word "innocent." (This is *the* crucial word of the poem, thematically speaking.) But this repetition actually highlights a difference: whereas in lines 13-14, the girl and her cousin "were very innocent / about" romance, now the grown woman merely "tries to be innocent / about it." There's a subtle but important gap between the two!

In childhood, innocence comes naturally: you understand nothing about desire, sexuality, romance, etc., so your first sensations associated with those things are very vivid and confusing. By adulthood, you understand much more about your body and the world. So while adults can try to preserve an innocent *spirit* as they navigate their love lives (i.e., hold on to a wholesome mentality, vivid sense of wonder, etc.), they can't really recover that initial intensity. In short, they can only *try* to be innocent; they can't reflexively *be* innocent—nor can they be "very innocent" in the way little kids are.

Implicitly, then, the repeated phrase here suggests that the woman's search is romantic and even noble, but also that, on some level, it's an impossible quest.

LINES 19-23

not only on ...
... someone suddenly sneezed.

In the final lines, the poem circles back to the image of the two cousins in a tree. Here, it seems to be the *speaker*, rather than the woman herself, describing the remembered scene. (In other words, this may be a poetic rendering of the woman's experience, as opposed to the woman's literal account of that experience.)

According to the speaker, the woman is still trying to be innocent in her adult life, "not only on the crotch of a tree" where she once sat with her cousin. (There's a double entendre on "crotch" here, again implying that the woman is recalling a sexual awakening—albeit a "very innocent" one!) The day she and her cousin climbed the tree, it seemed amazingly lush, fertile, and full of possibility. Metaphorically, it looked:

> as if it would burst

under every leaf
into a brood of scarlet figs
if someone suddenly sneezed.

In this way, it reflected the feeling of *romantic* possibility the girl experienced, including some vague sense of her future sexuality/fertility. As with "crotch," there may be some sexual innuendo in the words "burst" and "sneezed" here. Like a sneeze, an orgasm involves a sudden release of physical tension, so the two bodily functions are sometimes jokingly compared. In this case, the comparison is only delicately hinted at. But it seems to reflect the girl's hazy feeling that sex lies somewhere on the distant horizon—that the tension she feels around her cousin (in the "pits / of her feeling") has some meaning or potential she doesn't yet grasp.

The word "brood" reinforces this idea, too. It can mean any kind of group, but it primarily means a group of human or animal babies. Thus, the "brood of scarlet figs" that seems ready to "burst / under every leaf"—at any moment—ties in with the fertility symbolism. Again, there's probably also a Garden of Eden allusion lurking behind this combination of "tree," fruit, male/female duo, innocence, and so on.

Overall, then, there's a sense of ripeness and possibility, a feeling that something exciting *could* happen and perhaps someday will. These two kids have their whole lives ahead of them; they're just beginning to understand their own bodies and emotions. It's this novelty, this innocent intensity, that the woman seems to recall and long for in her adult love life.

SYMBOLS

THE SWING

On one level, the swing in the poem symbolizes childhood joy and innocence. Tree swings and swing sets have been used by children around the world for thousands of years. (Small towns in some cultures/regions do indeed have "village swing[s]" that are used communally.)

On another level, the swing is associated with the thrill of romance. The "lunge of the swing" corresponds with the woman's emotional "lunging" or yearning (as she flies into the air, she reaches a height of *emotion*). Her physical closeness to her cousin on the swing contributes to her sexual awakening. That "she looks for the swing" in the present reflects her desire to recapture the joy of young love and infatuation.

Finally, with its back-and-forth motion, the swing evokes the limbo between childhood and adulthood. As a child on the swing, the woman was suspended between innocence and maturity, briefly swinging forth into the latter.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-8:** "When she was four or five / she sat on a village swing / and her cousin, six or seven, / sat himself against her; / with every lunge of the swing / she felt him / in the lunging pits / of her feeling;"
- **Lines 15-16:** "Now she looks for the swing / in cities with fifteen suburbs"

THE TREE/THE FIGS

The tree in the poem is a symbol of fertility and ripeness. By extension, it's a symbol of youth, blooming attraction, and future sexual possibility. (The characters in the poem aren't yet sexually mature, but their childhood crush is depicted as a harbinger of possibilities to come.)

To the woman telling the anecdote, the tree "looked as if it would burst" at any moment "into a brood of scarlet figs" (lines 20, 22). Notice that "brood" more typically means a group of baby animals, or humans, so the word choice reinforces the fertility theme (as does the sexual pun on "crotch" in line 19). The fact that the tree is "not very tall, but full of leaves" (line 11) might also mirror the characters' situation: they're still very young, but their lives are full of energy and possibility.

There's likely some religious symbolism here, too. Since the poem depicts a kind of childhood paradise, the tree is reminiscent of the Tree of Knowledge in the story of Eden. According to this story (which spans the Jewish, Christian, and Islamic traditions), Adam and Eve are expelled from paradise after they taste the forbidden fruit from this tree. (The tasting is itself a metaphor for sex, a.k.a. carnal knowledge.) Though popular culture now tends to depict the forbidden fruit as an apple, other sources interpret the fruit as a fig. In other words, the "fig tree" comparison (line 12) subtly reinforces the allusion and the symbolism.

Notice that, in the poem, the figs are imaginary, so the two characters don't taste them. This may be a symbolic way of underscoring how "very innocent" their crush was.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 10-12:** "we climbed a tree, she said, / not very tall, but full of leaves / like those of a fig tree,"
- **Lines 19-23:** "not only on the crotch of a tree / that looked as if it would burst / under every leaf / into a brood of scarlet figs / if someone suddenly sneezed."

POETIC DEVICES

METAPHOR

Several metaphors appear in this short poem. In fact, the better part of the poem consists of figurative language, which concisely and evocatively shows why the woman's experience on the swing was so formative.

First comes the metaphor in lines 5-8:

> with every lunge of the swing
> she felt him
> in the lunging pits
> of her feeling;

This metaphor plays on the idiom "the pit of the stomach," which is where one might feel the gravity-defying sensation of swinging on a swing, and *also* where one might feel the nervous giddiness of romantic attraction. As the swing "lunge[s]" back and forth in the air—and the woman crushes on the cousin sitting against her—she feels her stomach drop and experiences a "lunging," yearning desire. The poet compresses these ideas into one powerful, figurative phrase: "the lunging pits / of her feeling." (Notice, too, how the metaphor conveys this "feeling" indirectly rather than defining it explicitly, perhaps because it was confusing and hard to define for the girl herself.)

Later, in lines 15-18, the poet builds on this metaphor:

> Now she looks for the swing
> in cities with fifteen suburbs
> and tries to be innocent
> about it

The woman isn't literally looking for her childhood swing; she's searching for the *feeling* she once had *on* the swing. In other words, as she moves from "cit[y]" to city, she's seeking that same sense of giddy, yet "innocent" romance.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 5-8:** "with every lunge of the swing / she felt him / in the lunging pits / of her feeling;"
- **Lines 15-18:** "Now she looks for the swing / in cities with fifteen suburbs / and tries to be innocent / about it"

SIMILE

The poem features two related similes, the first in lines 11-12 and the second in lines 20-23. First, the woman says she and her cousin climbed a tree that was "full of leaves / like those of a fig tree." Then, the woman (or the speaker relating her story) says that the tree

> [...] looked as if it would burst
> under every leaf
> into a brood of scarlet figs
> if someone suddenly sneezed.

So the tree isn't *actually* a fig tree—it may not even be a fruit tree. It's just so lush, leafy, and fertile that it *looks* as if it might "burst" into fruit at the slightest provocation. Together, these similes suggest a few things: how young and full of life the woman and her cousin were, how charged with romance and desire their time together felt, and perhaps even how full of hushed tension their moments together were. (As if even the slightest sneeze would startle, or provide a kind of release from the tension.) There are sexual overtones here as well—a foreshadowing of the "burst[s]" of sexual pleasure they will experience in their mature love lives—as well as a likely allusion to the Tree of Knowledge in the Garden of Eden, which, in some accounts, was a fig tree. (See the Allusion entry in this section for more.)

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Lines 11-12:** "not very tall, but full of leaves / like those of a fig tree,"
- **Lines 19-23:** "not only on the crotch of a tree / that looked as if it would burst / under every leaf / into a brood of scarlet figs / if someone suddenly sneezed."

IMAGERY

The poem is full of vibrant imagery that helps bring its childhood anecdote to life. Much of this imagery is visual. The poem describes the "village swing" where the woman and her cousin sat together, followed by the "tree" they climbed together, which was "not very tall, but full of leaves." The woman (or the speaker relating her story) also vividly *imagines* that this tree might have suddenly grown "a brood of scarlet figs"—reddish, date-like fruits. These details conjure up a lush, almost paradise-like world of greenery and outdoor fun. They're also rich with fertility symbolism, which hints at the budding of young romance.

Some of the imagery is tactile (touch-based) as well. For example, the phrase "her cousin [...] sat himself against her" is tactile as well as visual. "Against her" sounds slightly more intimate than *next to her*, *beside her*, etc., so it helps capture the romantic thrill of physical closeness. The next lines are even more visceral: "with every lunge of the swing / she felt him / in the lunging pits / of her feeling." For the girl crushing on her cousin, the giddy motion of the swing adds to her *emotional* giddiness.

There's a hint of sound imagery in the last lines, too, though once again, it occurs only in the woman's (or speaker's) imagination. The tree seems ready to "burst" into fruit "if

someone suddenly sneezed." The tree doesn't literally do that, of course, but thanks to the concrete vividness of the words "burst" and "sneezed," the reader can practically hear the *Achoo* and the magically budding fruit!

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Lines 4-8:** "sat himself against her; / with every lunge of the swing / she felt him / in the lunging pits / of her feeling;"
- **Lines 19-23:** "not only on the crotch of a tree / that looked as if it would burst / under every leaf / into a brood of scarlet figs / if someone suddenly sneezed."

ALLITERATION

The poem uses a great deal of alliteration, both for musical effect and emphasis.

First, the music: most of the poem is an idyllic childhood portrait, so it makes sense that the language would sound lyrical and pleasing. Listen to the consonant sounds in the opening lines, for example:

> When she was four or five
> she sat on a village swing
> and her cousin, six or seven,
> sat himself against her;

The /s/ alliteration, in particular, creates a soft, gentle sound, appropriate to this tender early-childhood memory. (It also places a little extra stress on the word "swing"—the poem's central image.) Combined with the breathy /h/ sounds, the sibilance here might also evoke an air of hushed expectation. Again, this sound would fit the narrative, which recounts a heart-pounding childhood crush. Fittingly enough, a similar effect appears in lines 15-16, which describe the same woman's search for romance as an adult: "Now she looks for the swing / in cities with fifteen suburbs."

There's also some delicate, alliterative music in lines 11-12:

> not very tall, but full of leaves
> like those of a fig tree,

Here, the /t/, /f/, and /l/ sounds trip lightly along, making the lines as pleasant to read and hear as the tree was to look at and climb.

Alliteration also adds dramatic emphasis, as in the final lines, which contain a cascade of /l/, /b/, and/s/ sounds:

> that looked as if it would burst
> under every leaf
> into a brood of scarlet figs
> if someone suddenly sneezed.

Together, the plosive consonants in "burst" and "brood" seem to *burst* off the page like the imagined figs themselves. Meanwhile, the sibilant s/ sounds seem to echo the romantic hush in the first stanza (after all, this last stanza has circled back to the original scene). At the same time, they occur in such rapid succession that they sound as forceful and surprising as a "sneeze[]."

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "four," "five"
- **Line 2:** "sat," "swing"
- **Line 3:** "six," "seven"
- **Line 4:** "sat," "himself," "her"
- **Line 10:** "tree"
- **Line 11:** "tall," "full," "leaves"
- **Line 12:** "like," "fig"
- **Line 15:** "swing"
- **Line 16:** "cities," "suburbs"
- **Line 20:** "looked," "burst"
- **Line 21:** "leaf"
- **Line 22:** "brood," "scarlet"
- **Line 23:** "someone suddenly sneezed"

ENJAMBMENT

The poem is heavily enjambed throughout; only a handful of its lines are end-stopped. In fact, the poet drops standard punctuation from the ends of several lines (such as lines 1 and 5, which would normally end with commas), as if to make the poem look even *more* enjambed on the page.

This style has several effects on the poem. For one thing, when combined with the poem's short lines, enjambment introduces a lot of pauses—far more pauses than the same sentences would have if they were laid out as prose. The result is a slightly halting, breathless rhythm that evokes the breathless excitement of the poem's situation. (Namely, swinging on a swing, plus having a dizzying crush!)

Enjambment also factors into the poem's emphasis and timing. For example, it tends to emphasize words that fall just before the line break, so Ramanujan uses this effect to stress thematically important words like "innocent" (lines 13 and 17). Similarly, "burst" falls just before the break in line 20, so the extra emphasis here makes the word itself seem to "burst" off the page.

Finally, enjambment (over a stanza break as well as a line break) adds dramatic power to the final line:

> [...] into a brood of scarlet figs
> if someone suddenly sneezed.

Enjambing after "figs" creates a momentary pause—like the pause before a sneeze!—before the poem lets loose with that

surprising, playful image.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-3:** "swing / and"
- **Lines 6-7:** "him / in"
- **Lines 7-8:** "pits / of"
- **Lines 9-10:** "afterwards / we"
- **Lines 11-12:** "leaves / like"
- **Lines 13-14:** "innocent / about"
- **Lines 15-16:** "swing / in"
- **Lines 16-17:** "suburbs / and"
- **Lines 17-18:** "innocent / about"
- **Lines 19-20:** "tree / that"
- **Lines 20-21:** "burst / under"
- **Lines 21-22:** "leaf / into"
- **Lines 22-23:** "figs / if"

JUXTAPOSITION

The poem juxtaposes past and present, childhood and adulthood, an "innocent" first crush with a grown-up love life.

More specifically, it juxtaposes an incident from a woman's childhood with a brief glimpse of the way she lives now. Most of the poem describes her experience on the "village swing" with her cousin, whom she developed a major crush on ("she felt him / in the lunging pits / of her feeling"). The woman also recalls climbing a lush, leafy tree with her cousin and playing or cuddling with him there. Their experience clearly felt romantic, though because they were very young (and cousins!), the woman hastily adds that "we were very innocent / about it."

Then, in lines 15-18, the poem offers a kind of snapshot of her adult life:

> Now she looks for the swing
> in cities with fifteen suburbs
> and tries to be innocent
> about it

The juxtaposition establishes both a *parallel* and a *contrast* between these two kinds of "innocen[ce]." On the one hand, the woman clearly wants the wonder, intensity, etc. of her childhood experience to carry over into her adult love life. In a metaphorical sense, "she looks for the swing" in various cities, probably while dating or otherwise seeking love. On the other hand, as an adult, she merely "tries to be" what she instinctively *was* as a child: that is, "innocent." By juxtaposing these two times in her life, then, the poem suggests that some of the best aspects of childhood are irrecoverable in adulthood. She will never again find the exact equivalent of "the swing": she can only try to come close.

Where Juxtaposition appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-10
- Lines 13-18

VOCABULARY

Village swing (Lines 1-2) - A recreational swing used communally by members of a small town.

Lunge/Lunging pits (Lines 5-8) - The "lunge of the swing" is the swing's ascent as it goes back and forth. The woman compares this to the metaphorical "lunging" in the "pits of her feeling": an intense physical yearning or desire.

Crotch of a tree (Lines 19-20) - The angle where a tree branch joins a tree trunk. (A sexual double entendre on "crotch" is implied.)

Brood (Line 22) - A group of something, usually baby animals (but here referring to budding figs).

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Looking for a Cousin on a Swing" contains six stanzas of varying length, from a single line (line 23) to ten lines (lines 1-10). It's written in free verse, meaning that it doesn't use meter or a rhyme scheme, though it sticks to shorter lines throughout.

This variation allows for plenty of flexibility in the poem's pacing and timing. The pace is pretty slow in general, due to the short lines (frequent line breaks = frequent pauses), but the one- and two-line stanzas force the reader to slow down quite a bit. This effect focuses attention on several key moments in the poem, including the woman's first declaration of "innocen[ce]" (lines 13-14) and the symbolically charged image of "someone suddenly sneez[ing]" (line 23). This last line arrives in a one-line burst, as if to mimic the suddenness and brevity of a sneeze!

Also notable are the two stanzas that end with the same words: "innocent / about it" (stanzas 3 and 4). This parallel actually helps highlight a contrast: in the first case, the speaker says "we **were** very innocent," while in the second, the speaker says that the woman "**tries** to be innocent." That subtle gap between past and present, being and trying, ironically signals the *loss* of innocence that comes with growing up.

METER

The poem has no meter; it's written in free verse. In general, it sticks to shorter lines throughout: the shortest lines have three syllables and the longest has nine.

The pace remains pretty steady overall, then, even if there's no strict rhythm. But it includes some notable variations for the

sake of dramatic timing and emphasis. For example, the speaker gives the emotionally charged, three-syllable statement "she felt him" the weight of its own line.

RHYME SCHEME

As a free verse poem, "Looking for a Cousin on a Swing" has no rhyme scheme. The closest it comes to rhyming is the repetition of key words and phrases at the ends of lines and stanzas. For example, the repetition of "swing" at the ends of lines 2, 5, and 15 subtly evokes the repetitive motion of the swing itself. The repetition of "innocent / about it" in lines 13-14 and 17-18 draws out the contrast between innate childhood innocence and adult *attempts* at innocence.

SPEAKER

The identity of the poem's speaker is unclear. The speaker is relaying an anecdote that someone—a grown woman—has shared about her childhood. But the speaker provides no information about themselves, very little about the woman (whom they just call "she"/"her"), and no hint about the relationship between them, if any.

Basically, the speaker is a third-person narrator presenting a slice of an anonymous woman's life. This anonymity makes the story seem more universal (or archetypal, given the poem's allusions to the Garden of Eden). However, the phrase "she said" in line 10 suggests that the speaker may not be an omniscient narrative voice, but rather an individual *hearing* this anecdote in some social setting.

SETTING

The poem's main setting is the "village" the protagonist grew up in. This village had a communal, recreational "swing" where she once played with her cousin. Near this swing was a leafy "tree," something like a "fig tree," which she and her cousin climbed together. The tree is described in vaguely eroticized terms: the speaker notes the "crotch" where branch meets trunk, and the girl feels the tree might "burst" into fertile life at any moment.

All in all, the scene seems idyllic and romantic, in a "very innocent" way. In fact, the combined elements of innocence, joy, love, etc. make this place sound like a childhood paradise. And because this paradise contains a female figure, a male figure, and a blossoming tree, it recalls the biblical Garden of Eden. (Note that, in some interpretations, the garden's Tree of Knowledge was a "fig tree," not an apple tree!) This subtle allusion reinforces the poem's themes of nostalgia and loss.

The poem also juxtaposes this childhood scene with the woman's adult experience. Nowadays, the woman bounces from place to place, passing through "cities with fifteen suburbs" in search of sex, love, or both. In other words, she leads a cosmopolitan life, and may have a complicated love life. Through it all, however, she feels she's still "look[ing] for the swing"—seeking the intensity of that early taste of romance—and "tr[ying] to" remain "innocent" at heart.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Born in India in 1929, Attipate Krishnaswami Ramanujan, who published as A. K. Ramanujan, became one of the most distinguished Indo-American poets and scholars of the 20th century. "Looking for a Cousin on a Swing" was published in *The Striders* (1966), his debut poetry collection.

This poem's free verse places it generally within the tradition of modernist and post-modernist poetry in English. It also intersects with trends in post-colonial literature of the era. Around the 1960s, when the poem was published, some writers in former British colonies (e.g., India) began to favor free verse as a gesture of political/cultural rebellion—a way of rejecting the conventions of older English (and Western) literature. At the same time, free verse was becoming more prevalent in poetry throughout the Anglosphere, so it didn't always carry these political connotations.

Ramanujan taught for many years in the University of Chicago's Department of South Asian Languages and Civilizations, as well as in the Committee on Social Thought and the Department of Linguistics. His academic work spanned a number of disciplines, including philology (itself a multifaceted subject involving the study of languages and literature), linguistics, and folklore studies. Ramanujan was also a translator, essayist, playwright, and editor. His poetry ranged widely and drew frequently on the folklore and culture of his native India. His work was honored with a MacArthur Fellowship, popularly known as a "genius grant," in 1983.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"Looking for a Cousin on a Swing" contains no direct historical references, nor does it specify a geographical setting. Its reference to multiple "cities with fifteen suburbs" places its story loosely within the modern era, since such sprawling urban centers are largely a product of 19th-century industrialization and became more common with 20th-century globalization. (In 1900, the average population of the world's 100 largest cities was under 1 million; by 1950, it had reached 2 million, and by 2020, nearly 10 million. During the same period, many of these metropolises vastly expanded their geographic footprint as well, sprouting suburbs and exurbs in a phenomenon known as "urban sprawl.") Otherwise, the poem sketches a seemingly timeless, even archetypal childhood scene, with imagery that recalls the mythical Garden of Eden.

The cultural context for the poem's crush between "cousin[s]" is

unclear. The poem describes a very early and "very innocent" childhood crush, not a serious romance, and it doesn't clarify how closely the two characters are related (first cousins, second, etc.). Cultural views on partnerships between cousins vary widely across cultures, regions, and religious groups (including within Ramanujan's native India), so the poem's premise may or may not imply an element of taboo.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Poet's Life and Work — Read a short biography of A. K. Ramanujan at the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/a-k-ramanujan)
- The Poet as Scholar — Watch Ramanujan deliver a 1988 speech for a workshop on folklore studies. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZiPufJTun-U)
- "Asian American Voices in Poetry" — Read Ramanujan's work as part of Poetry Foundation's "collection of poets and articles exploring Asian American culture." (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/collections/101589/asian-american-voices-in-poetry)
- Swings in History — A brief history of swings across cultures, including in painting and sculpture. (https://www.wallacecollection.org/explore/explore-in-depth/fragonards-the-swing/origins-of-the-swing/swings-in-history/)
- More About the Author — Biographical information on Ramanujan, courtesy of the University of Chicago Library. (https://www.lib.uchicago.edu/e/scrc/findingaids/view.php?eadid=ICU.SPCL.RAMANUJANAK)

HOW TO CITE

MLA

Allen, Austin. "*Looking for a Cousin on a Swing.*" *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 26 Jun 2023. Web. 30 Jun 2023.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Allen, Austin. "*Looking for a Cousin on a Swing.*" LitCharts LLC, June 26, 2023. Retrieved June 30, 2023. https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/a-k-ramanujan/looking-for-a-cousin-on-a-swing.