The Darling Letters

SUMMARY

The speaker says that people sometimes hang on to their old love letters by tucking them away in dark shoeboxes. When people take the lid off of this box, their painful memories sputter out, like eyes emerging from the darkness and blinking as they adjust to the light. The letters are filled with evidence of their own past carelessness—and of the speaker's carelessness, too. They're filled with inside jokes that the speaker either doesn't get anymore or no longer finds funny, their punchlines awkwardly filling the pauses between sweet nothings. The speaker provides the setup of one such joke: the letter writer asks what clothes their lover is wearing.

Then the punchline comes: the writer tells their reader, "Don't ever change" (punning on changing *clothes* and changing one's *personality*). The letters, the speaker continues, begin with affection but end with accusations and goodbyes. Despite all the time that's passed, the speaker's hands still quiver when they take the letters out. They press their fingers to the page and remember what they were dreaming of and hoping for when they first read these words—words like "Always." The speaker says that no one destroys these precious letters, which instead remain buried in those coffin-like shoeboxes.

Seeing a pet name in a letter, the speaker notes that couples always have cutesy nicknames for each other that are embarrassing to think about later on, as though they were pseudonyms used when they killed someone way back when. The speaker reads a line in which an ex-lover professes that without the speaker's love, they'd positively *die*. Every now and then, the speaker says, when no one else is around, people take these letters out and re-read the familiar words, which make their blood pounding like a shovel digging up a corpse.

The speaker makes it clear that these letters are artifacts from another life: this relationship ran its course long ago, and the speaker isn't the same person they were when they wrote/received these letters. The letters thus don't read as they once did: the jokes seem corny or no longer make sense at all, and the speaker bristles at their former use of pet names like "Babykins."

The speaker seems even more mortified about how shameless and wild their desire once was. They say their "own recklessness" is "written all over" the letters and note phrases like "I'll die without you" and "Don't ever Change." Yet even as the letters begin with such passionate declarations of everlasting devotion, they "end in recriminations" (or accusations). Reading them all in hindsight thus makes the speaker feel a bit silly; time has made the speaker's former love seem naive and melodramatic.

Even so, these letters still hold a certain power over the speaker. Though the speaker's emotions have cooled, revisiting these letters stirs feelings of nostalgia for a love that once felt all-consuming. "Even now," the speaker says, "the fist's bud flowers / into trembling": re-reading these letters unclenches the speaker's hardened feelings, and the speaker "trace[s] each line and see[s] / the future then."

In other words, reading their ex-lover's words allows the speaker to briefly relive the thrilling hopefulness and promise they once felt. Though they don't re-read these "letters" often, when they do, their "heart thud[s] / like a spade on buried bones." Remembering this old love is like digging up a corpse: they know that this relationship is firmly in the past, but revisiting these old proclamations of love and devotion nevertheless makes the speaker's heart pound. And that, the poem suggests, is why "[n]obody burns" these emblems of past love: the letters are a reminder of what it feels like to be wildly alive.

THEMES

NOSTALGIA FOR PAST LOVE

"The Darling Letters" explores the changing nature of relationships and the nostalgic allure of old love letters. People often stash such letters away long after a relationship has fizzled, the speaker says, pulling them out from time to time despite finding them both embarrassing and painful to revisit. Although the speaker recognizes that these letters no longer hold the same meaning they once did, they also refuse to part with them. The poem ultimately suggests that even as relationships change, people may hold onto mementos of lost love because they offer a taste of the passion and hope that once made them feel intensely alive.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-18

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-3

Some keep them ...
... My own...

The poem begins with the speaker describing how "[s]ome" people "keep them" hidden away in "shoeboxes." From the poem's title, readers can assume that this "them" refers to the

"Darling Letters." While the speaker hasn't yet said what, exactly, a darling letter *is*, the word "darling" implies that these are sentimental items—likely love letters. The fact that people keep such letters hidden away in a box, meanwhile, suggests two things:

- People want to keep these letters safe (they're not shoved willy nilly in the back of a drawer, but placed into protective boxes).
- People don't want to think about them. They keep the letters out of sight and out of mind—most of the time, at least.

As the speaker says in the next line, people occasionally take these shoeboxes out of the darkness and revisit the "sore memories" within, the same way that someone might feel compelled to pick at a scab or prod an old bruise. Upon lifting the shoebox lid and exposing these memories, they seem to blink at the sudden brightness (think of how you might squint and blink when someone suddenly turns the light on in a dark room). The speaker is personifying the memories here, treating them as things that have a will and agency all their own. These letters, the poem implies, contain *life*.

Next, readers learn why people tend to keep these letters hidden most of the time: reading them means confronting "their own recklessness." These letters, it seems, contain evidence of people's wilder, more careless younger selves. And in the time since the letters were written, their intended readers have changed and (ostensibly) matured; they're no longer as reckless as they once were.

Notice how, in line 3, the poem also shifts out of the third person for the first time. While it began with the speaker referring only to "some" people"—effectively distancing themselves from things—they admit now that they're familiar with this process of revisiting the past; it's not just *other* people's recklessness, but "*My own...*" the speaker says. The italicization of "*My own...*" might suggest that the speaker is reading out a quotation from a letter (perhaps a sweet/sappy reference to one's beloved), but this phrase can be read as the speaker correcting themselves, moving from describing other people's experiences to admitting that they, too, have letters tucked away in shoeboxes.

This poem is written in free verse, meaning it doesn't follow a regular meter or rhyme scheme. That being said, it is still quite lyrical! Note, for example, the alliteration of "lid lifts" and "recklessness written," which adds subtle music and intensity to the poem and helps to evoke the mixture of anxiety, anticipation, and excitement upon revisiting past relationships.

LINES 4-7

Private jokes, no ...
... Don't ever change.

Having lifted the lid off this box of letters, the speaker goes on to describe their contents. In many ways, these old love letters haven't aged very well! For one thing, they're filled with inside jokes that no longer make any sense: they "pull their punchlines." The phrase "pull their punchlines" might be riffing on the phrase "pull no punches," which means to be forthright or to hold nothing back. A joke that pulls its "punchline," then, would be one that fails to hit its mark. In other words, it's not very funny.

The speaker thus says that these jokes "fall flat," meaning they don't land or hit the way they're supposed to. The speaker takes the common phrase "fall flat" and imagines it literally, as though they're falling down into the "gaps," or spaces, between "endearments"—that is, sweet talk or words of love and affection.

Notice how the plosive /p/ sounds and the sharp /k/ sounds of "jokes" and "comprehended," add a burst of intensity to line 4:

> Private jokes, no longer comprehended, pull their punchlines,

The line sounds sharp and forceful. This is followed by the fricative /f/ alliteration, liquid /l/ consonance, and nasally /ah/ assonance of "fall flat in the gaps" in the next line; the poem's sound itself seems to tumble from being crisp to muffled, subtly evoking the fact that these inside jokes now fail now to make the recipient laugh.

The speaker then provides an example of one such joke: the letter writer asks "*What are you wearing?*" only to follow it up in the next line with "*Don't ever change.*" This is a pun on changing *clothing* and changing one's *personality*.

Of course, the recipient *has* changed in the time since this letter was sent. The joke, then, highlights the naivety of young love and of the idea that people can possibly remain the same forever.

LINES 8-11

They start with ...
... Always...

The letters the speaker is re-reading "start with Darling"—hence the title of the poem!—and "end in recriminations." The letters thus track the deteriorating of this relationship, which apparently moved declarations of love and affection to accusations of blame.

Notice the use of caesura and asyndeton in lines 8-9:

> They start with Darling; end in recriminations,

The pause in the middle of this line separates the beginning of this relationship from its end. The asyndeton (the last of conjunction between these two clauses) also quickens the

rhythm of the line, making that "end" feel all the more abrupt. The next line features asyndeton as well ("absence, sense of loss"), making the line feel rather terse and spare and, evoking the pain of that "absence." The sibilance here evokes "absence" as well, lending a whispery, hushed quality to the poem at this moment: "absence, sense of loss."

Despite being full of cringe-worthy jokes and "recklessness," the speaker says that the letters still have the power to stir up emotions. "Even now" they can make the "bud" of the speaker's fist unfurl. The speaker is metaphorically comparing their closed fist to a blooming flower bud:

- Fists usually symbolize anger, tension, and so forth, while flowers are traditional symbols of love, romance, and beauty.
- That the letters make the speaker's fist "flower[]" thus implies that the letters have the power to loosen the speaker's lingering feelings of resentment, regret, etc.

Their fist unclenched, they can "trace each line" with "trembling" fingers. Revisiting these letters is frightening and exciting, it seems, especially as the speaker remembers what it was like to envision a "future" with this person. The letters have the power to open up old wounds and hopes alike.

While the majority of the poem's lines have been end-stopped up until this point, notice how the enjambment across lines 9-11 echoes the metaphorical flowering of the speaker's "fist":

> [...] Even now, the fist's bud flowers
> into trembling, the fingers trace each line and see
> the future then. *Always*... [...]

The speaker then reads the word *"Always,"* perhaps recalling promises they made to one another long ago. That "Always" didn't work out, given that the relationship is over, but there's still something intoxicating about remembering what it was like to be a person who believed in everlasting love.

LINES 11-12

> *Nobody burns them, ...*
> *... their cardboard coffins.*

Having relayed how thrilling re-reading these letters can be, the speaker now declares that nobody even "burns them." In other words, people don't destroy the letters. And, the poem implies, that's because these letters offer a glimpse into a more hopeful, passionate time in their recipients' lives.

The italicization of the word "*Darling*" before "letters" reveals that the letters are so named because they begin with the word "Darling," a term of endearment. At the same time, this title implies that the letters themselves are "darling," or dear, to those who keep them.

The speaker then says that these letters stay "stiff in their cardboard coffins." This is a metaphorical description of those "shoeboxes" mentioned in line 1. The metaphor turns the letters themselves into a corpse or a pile of bones, remnants of a relationship that's over for good. That they're buried in "coffins," however, implies a certain level of reverence or respect for these letters; they need to be thoughtfully laid to rest rather than ruthlessly or carelessly destroyed.

Listen to the consonance and alliteration of line 12:

> the *Darling* letters, stiff in their cardboard coffins

The crisp /k/ and fricative /f/ sounds heighten the poem's language at this moment, calling attention to this striking image of the letters buried like a body in a grave.

LINES 13-15

> *Babykins... ...*
> *... alias, long ago.*

The speaker begins the poem's final stanza by quoting a cutesy pet name used in one of these letters: "*Babykins.*" Love goggles long since tossed aside, silly nicknames like this just sound "strange" and embarrassing rather than sweet.

Such nicknames now make people "blush," the speaker continues. In a simile, the speaker compares reading them in the present to feeling "as though we'd murdered / someone under an alias, long ago." An alias is a pseudonym, a false name someone takes on (usually for a specific purpose). The word suggests that the person who once readily used these pet names no longer exists; they're someone entirely separate from who the speaker is now. The mention of murder, meanwhile, hammers home the death of this relationship—and perhaps suggests that the speaker broke their former lover's heart.

Finally, note how the poem has started using the collective pronouns "we" and "us" in this stanza. The speaker believes that they're not alone in these feelings and behaviors; many people, readers of this poem included, have likely looked back on their lovey-dovey behavior in past relationships and cringed.

LINES 15-18

> *I'll die ...*
> *... on buried bones.*

The speaker once again quotes the letter they're re-reading, whose writer says, *"I'll die / without you. Die."* The use of diacope here (the repetition of the word "die") adds drama to this statement. The letter writer is being hyperbolic: they won't *really* die if they're separated from their lover. Instead, this hyperbole illustrates how the letter writer couldn't imagine living without the speaker. Now, of course, this declaration probably sounds more melodramatic than romantic!

Even so, the speaker admits that they still like to re-read the

letters now and then. They do this while "alone," perhaps because they're embarrassed but also because this experience is deeply intimate and personal. And even if they think the letters are naive and over-the-top, they still find their "heart thudding" when they take them out. Perhaps their heart pounds out of excitement, fear, guilt, hope, or all of the above. What's clear is that the letters unleash a swirl of emotions in the speaker—emotions that, perhaps, they don't experience all that often now that they're older and not quite so "reckless" in love.

The speaker then uses a simile to compare their quickening pulse to a "spade" (shovel) digging into the ground and hitting "buried bones." The pulsing /d/ and /b/ consonance and alliteration of "thudding," "spade," and "buried bones" evokes the pounding of the speaker's heart, drawing attention to the intensity of this moment.

Note, too, how much talk of death is in the poem towards the end: the letters are like "stiff" bodies in their shoebox "coffins"; the speaker feels like they "murdered" someone way back when; the letter writer declares they'll simply "die" without the speaker. This final simile builds on all this death talk, emphasizing both the drama of this relationship and the fact that it is really and truly over. Reliving it is akin to trying to wake the dead—but it thrills the speaker anyway.

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

Alliteration adds plenty of musicality and rhythm to the poem, emphasizing the speaker's nostalgia for the intense passion of young love.

For instance, multiple alliterative phrases in the first stanza help build a sense of anticipation as the speaker pulls out a shoebox filled with old letters. As the "lid lifts," the speaker catches sight of "their own recklessness written all over them." The lilting /l/ sounds work well to evoke the gentle removal of the box's top, while the gritty /r/ sounds seem to capture the roughness of the speaker's younger love.

In the next two lines, the quick patter of "pull their punchlines" and "fall flat" seems to at once suggest the elaborate prose of these letters and to evoke a kind of stutter, as if the "jokes" that once seemed so funny now feel awkward and ill-timed. And in the second stanza, /f/ and /tr/ alliteration brings a striking metaphor to life:

> [...] Even now, the fist's bud flowers
> into trembling, and the fingers trace each line and see

The insistent /f/ sounds here draw the reader's ear to certain details: to the speaker's curled "fist," a sign of pent-up aggression, and to the way it begins to "flower[]," to gently and beautifully unclench. The stuttering /tr/ of "trembling" and "trace" might then evoke the very "trembling" being described: the way the speaker moves haltingly, hesitantly as they revisit this old love.

Later, notice how the crisp /k/ sounds of "cardboard coffins" create a sharp, tight-lipped feel appropriate for a description of the letters being forever hidden away. Finally, the bold /b/ of the last line's "buried bones" is almost onomatopoeic, evoking both the "thudding" of the speaker's heart and the imagined thwack of a shovel against a grave.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "lid," "lifts"
- **Line 3:** "recklessness," "written"
- **Line 4:** "pull," "punchlines"
- **Line 5:** "fall," "flat," "What"
- **Line 6:** "wearing"
- **Line 9:** "fist's," "flowers"
- **Line 10:** "trembling," "fingers," "trace"
- **Line 11:** "future"
- **Line 12:** "cardboard," "coffins"
- **Line 18:** "buried," "bones"

CONSONANCE

Like alliteration, consonance adds music and intensity to the poem and also brings certain images to life on the page. For example, listen to the mixture of sibilance and thin /n/ sounds in lines 8-9:

> [...] end in recriminations,
> absence, sense of loss. [...]

The nasally /n/ sounds suggest words spoken through gritted teeth, or perhaps a sense of emotional resentment as the speaker relays the painful way the letters "end." The hushed /s/ sounds, meanwhile, evoke the "absence" and "sense of loss" being described, quieting the line to a whisper.

In the final two lines of the poem, the pounding /d/ sounds of "thudding like a spade" evokes the pounding of the speaker's heart. Again, then, consonance helps to make the poem more immediate and visceral.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "lid lifts"
- **Line 3:** "recklessness written"
- **Line 4:** "Private," "jokes," "comprehended," "pull," "punchlines"
- **Line 5:** "fall flat," "gaps," "What"
- **Line 6:** "wearing"
- **Line 8:** "start," "Darling," "end in"

- **Lines 8-9:** "recriminations, / absence, sense"
- **Line 9:** "loss," "fist's," "bud," "flowers"
- **Line 10:** "trembling," "fingers," "trace"
- **Line 11:** "future"
- **Line 12:** "stiff," "cardboard coffins"
- **Line 13:** "Babykins"
- **Line 17:** "thudding"
- **Line 18:** "spade," "buried bones"

ASSONANCE

Assonance, like its cousins alliteration and consonance, calls attention to certain moments in the poem and often makes its images more striking for the reader.

For example, the short, staccato /ih/ sounds of "lid lifts" (a phrase that's also alliterative) might subtly evoke the metaphorical "blinking" of those "memories" once they're exposed to the light after being hidden in darkness. Similarly, in line 5, the nasally /ah/ assonance of "flat" and "gaps" seems to mimic that "flatness" itself—the way that old inside jokes land with a thud.

The pleasant near rhyme of "start" and "Darling" in line 8 is fittingly musical, lending a wistful, happy tone as the speaker mentions the letters' happy beginnings. And in the final stanza, the long, round /o/ of "alone" and "bones" closes the poem out with a sort of mournful echo.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "lid," "lifts"
- **Line 5:** "flat," "gaps"
- **Line 8:** "start," "Darling"
- **Line 9:** "absence," "sense," "now," "flowers"
- **Line 12:** "stiff in," "coffins"
- **Line 13:** "Babykins," "strange," "names"
- **Line 14:** "make"
- **Line 16:** "alone"
- **Line 18:** "bones"

ASYNDETON

Asyndeton adds to the poem's solemn yet casual tone. Take a look at lines 4-5, for example:

> Private jokes, no longer comprehended, pull their punchlines,
> fall flat in the gaps between the endearments.

The lack of any coordinating conjunction (such as "and") between "pull their punchlines" and "fall flat" speeds up this list, making the speaker come across as being resigned to (or, put more positively, accepting of) the way things have changed.

The asyndeton of lines 8-9 has a similar feel; the speaker sounds straightforward and matter-of-fact even while discussing something ostensibly quite painful:

> They start with Darling; end in recriminations, absence, sense of loss. [...]

The lack of any conjunctions here further suggests that there's no real *hierarchy* between these list items. That is, the fact that the letters *begin* sweetly isn't necessarily more pertinent than the fact that they *end* coldly. It also creates the sense that this list of things the letters "end in" is just a small sampling, *illustrative* rather than *exhaustive* (that is, the list doesn't end here; there are plenty of other emotions the speaker links with the letters from the end stage of this relationship).

Consider how differently the passage would read had the poet *not* used asyndeton:

> They start with Darling, and they end in recriminations,
> absence, and a sense of loss. [...]

The omissions give the passage a rather fragmented feel, and in speeding up the line they also highlight how quickly a relationship can change.

The final example of asyndeton comes in lines 10-11:

> into trembling, the fingers trace each line and see the future then. [...]

Once again, the omission of any coordinating conjunctions speeds up the passage. It also suggests that these two actions are happening at the same time: the "fist" unclenches as the speaker's "fingers trace" the letters' lines. This implies that reading the words of their ex-lover is what allows some part of the speaker to blossom, to let go of the anger and tension represented by that "fist."

Where Asyndeton appears in the poem:

- **Lines 4-5:** "Private jokes, no longer comprehended, pull their punchlines, / fall flat in the gaps between the endearments."
- **Lines 8-9:** "They start with Darling; end in recriminations, / absence, sense of loss."
- **Lines 9-11:** "the fist's bud flowers / into trembling, the fingers trace each line and see / the future then"

METAPHOR

The poem uses three metaphors. These help to establish the significance of the "Darling letters" and imbue them with a power and life all their own.

In the first metaphor, the speaker compares the "sore

memories" contained within their old love letters to eyes "blinking" when exposed to light after being in the dark for a long time:

> Some keep them in shoeboxes away from the light,
> sore memories blinking out as the lid lifts,

This metaphor (which is also an example of personification) brings these painful memories to vivid life. In turn, it emphasizes the hold that the letters still have over their readers, even years after the relationship they describe has ended.

That hold is on display again in the poem's second metaphor, when the speaker says that while reading the letters in the present, "the fist's bud flowers / into trembling." In other words, the speaker's clenched fist is akin to a flower bud that blooms—slowly, hesitantly—as the speaker reads the letters. A closed fist connotes tension and anger, so this metaphor illustrates how these letters release the speaker's pent-up emotions; they loosen the grip of old resentments, thus allowing the speaker to relive the thrilling sense of hope that accompanied their young love. And this, the speaker suggests, is why no one ever "burns" these letters. Instead, the speaker says in the poem's final metaphor, the letters remain "stiff in their cardboard coffins"—stashed away in shoeboxes in the dark.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "sore memories blinking out as the lid lifts,"
- **Lines 9-10:** "Even now, the fist's bud flowers / into trembling,"
- **Line 12:** "stiff in their cardboard coffins."

SIMILE

In addition to its three metaphors, the poem also uses two similes in order to illustrate the speaker's feelings toward their former relationship. First, in lines 13-15, the speaker says:

> [...] We all had strange names
> which make us blush, as though we'd murdered
> someone under an alias, long ago.

An "alias" is a fake name or false identity someone adopts, usually for a particular reason (i.e., to commit a crime!). By comparing a pet name between lovers to an "alias," the speaker suggests that sometimes people change so much over time that past versions of them can feel unrecognizable. The fact that the speaker makes a joke about "murder[ing] / someone" under this "alias" reflects how ridiculous they feel looking back on this old version of themselves (a version they allowed to be called something as silly and embarrassing as "Babykins"). The mention of murder might also suggest that the speaker was the one to pull the plug on this relationship (i.e., that they metaphorically killed their partner in the sense that they broke their heart, all the while going by "Babykins").

In the last two lines of the poem, the speaker uses another simile to compare their "thudding [heart]" to "a spade on buried bones." The pounding of their heart reminds them of a shovel's thwacks into the dirt while digging up a dead body. This simile reflects the fact that the speaker's quickened pulse, their sudden surge of emotion, is brought on by something that no longer exists.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Lines 13-15:** "We all had strange names / which make us blush, as though we'd murdered / someone under an alias, long ago."
- **Lines 17-18:** "the heart thudding / like a spade on buried bones."

ENJAMBMENT

The poem uses a mixture of enjambed and end-stopped lines to create tension and momentum. The first four lines of the poem are all end-stopped, perhaps echoing the speaker's hesitancy as they pull out their shoebox of old letters, slowly opening the "lid" and pulling them out one by one.

The first enjambment then appears across lines 5-6, which is also the first time any words from the letters themselves appear in the poem. The speaker is quoting one of the "[p]rivate jokes" that they no longer find funny; the enjambment suggests the enduring allure of such jokes nonetheless, pulling readers swiftly across the line break in a way that evokes the pull of the letters themselves:

> [...] *What*
> *are you wearing?*

There are two more enjambments later on, in lines 9-11:

> [...] Even now, the fist's bud flowers
> into trembling, the fingers trace each line and see
> the future then. [...]

The first enjambment skillfully evokes the action it is describing, the line itself seeming to stretch out and blossom along with the speaker's fist. The enjambment of this passage also creates a sense of building anticipation and excitement, the poem moving more fluidly and swiftly as the speaker begins to re-read the letters.

The final stanza is heavily enjambed as well, again building up the poem's momentum as it nears its conclusion. These enjambments might reflect the way that the speaker is getting swept up by the letters and evoke the thrill of re-visiting old

professions of love and loyalty.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 5-6:** "What / are"
- **Lines 9-10:** "flowers / into"
- **Lines 10-11:** "see / the"
- **Lines 13-14:** "names / which"
- **Lines 14-15:** "murdered / someone"
- **Lines 15-16:** "die / without"
- **Lines 17-18:** "thudding / like"

CAESURA

Caesura adds to the poem's thoughtful, meditative tone. Because there's so much caesura here, the poem feels more reticent and reflective than urgent. This is fitting, as the relationship these letters describe ended long ago.

The speaker also uses caesura for dramatic effect. Take line 3, which features a firm full stop after "them":

> their own recklessness written all over them. *My own...*

In this pause, the speaker reconsiders their relationship to the letters being described. They move from talking about *other* people to admitting that they themselves have personal experience with these letters. The pause dramatizes this transition. (The phrase "My own" might also be read as a quotation from one of the letters in question.)

Caesura marks other important transitions in the poem as well. Listen to the pause in the middle of line 8, for instance, which calls attention to the sharp contrast between the beginning of the relationship being described and the end:

> They start with Darling; end in recriminations

The caesura effectively divides the line in two, granting each part the relationship equal space. This might subtly evoke the idea that the relationship was neither entirely good nor entirely bad, and the way it started was no better or worse than the way it ended.

Listen, too, to the full stop and ellipses surrounding "Always" in line 11:

> the future then. *Always...* Nobody burns them,

The caesura separates this word, which readers can assume is a quotation plucked from one of the letters, from the rest of the line. The word interrupts the speaker's thoughts, momentarily transporting them and the reader back to this relationship.

Another interesting example of caesura comes in line 16, where a flurry of pauses slow the line down and ramp up the drama:

> *without you. Die.* Once in awhile, alone,

These pauses help to emphasize the hyperbole of the writer of the letters—the dramatic full stops evidencing their seriousness.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-3:** "them. / My"
- **Line 4:** "jokes, no," "comprehended, pull"
- **Lines 5-5:** "endearments. / What"
- **Line 8:** "Darling; end"
- **Line 9:** "absence, sense," "loss. Even," "now, the"
- **Line 10:** "trembling, the"
- **Lines 11-11:** "then. / Always..."
- **Line 12:** "letters, stiff"
- **Lines 13-13:** "Babykins... / We"
- **Line 14:** "blush,"
- **Line 15:** "alias, long"
- **Lines 15-15:** "ago. / I'll"
- **Lines 16-16:** "you. Die. / Once"
- **Line 16:** "while, alone,"
- **Line 17:** "again, the"

HYPERBOLE

Lines 15-16 feature the poem's clearest example of hyperbole, which pops up as the speaker reads from one of their old love letters. The letter writer says, "*I'll die / without you. Die.*" Of course, the letter writer won't *literally* die without their beloved; instead, they're exaggerating things for dramatic effect, trying to convey just how important this relationship is to them. The diacope of this phrase (the repetition of the word "die") makes it feel all the more urgent and emphatic.

One might also argue that "Always" in line 11 is also hyperbolic, given that no relationship can literally last forever. While a more subtle example of the device, the hyperbole here again calls attention to the passion and, indeed, the "recklessness" of the speaker's former love.

Remember that the speaker was younger when they first received these letters. The poem's use of hyperbole thus also speaks to the way that young love can *feel* like a matter of life or death even when in reality it isn't. The speaker is far removed from this relationship and is now less naive (and, perhaps, open to passion) than they once were. Such extreme declarations of devotion seem silly and melodramatic in hindsight.

Where Hyperbole appears in the poem:

- **Line 11:** "Always..."
- **Lines 15-16:** "I'll die / without you. Die."

VOCABULARY

Recklessness (Line 3) - Failure to consider the consequences of one's actions; irresponsible behavior.

Punchlines (Line 4) - The ending of a joke; the part of a joke that makes it funny and/or make sense.

Comprehended (Line 4) - Understood.

Endearments (Line 5) - Sweet or affectionate talk.

Recriminations (Line 8) - Accusations.

Babykins (Lines 13-13) - A pet name.

Alias (Lines 14-15) - An alternate identity or pseudonym.

Spade (Lines 17-18) - A tool used for digging; a shovel.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

Though this is a free verse poem that doesn't use any traditional form (unlike, say, a sonnet or a villanelle), it does have some structure: its 18 lines are split into three sestets, or six-line stanzas.

This adds a kind of firm backbone to the poem, one that perhaps mirrors that of the letters themselves; the letters are frozen in time, yet their contents still reliably make the speaker's hands tremble and their heart pound.

The poem's lines are also fairly long and use plenty of enjambment, moving fluidly down the page in a way that fits right in with the speaker's meditative, nostalgic tone.

METER

As a free verse poem, "The Darling Letters" doesn't use a set meter. This is common for contemporary poetry, and here it works well with the speaker's thoughtful, reflective tone. The lines flow smoothly and conversationally, adding to the sense that the speaker is reflecting on the letters laid out before them at this very moment, filled with both contemplative nostalgia and heart-pounding anticipation.

RHYME SCHEME

The poem is written in free verse and therefore doesn't use a rhyme scheme. As with the poem's lack of meter, this is relatively common for contemporary poems and here keeps things feeling conversational and unpredictable, as though the speaker is processing their thoughts in real time.

The speaker bristles at the letters' use of pet names and melodramatic declarations of love and anger, so it also might make sense that the poem feels subtle and straightforward in terms of sound. Showy rhyme patterns might feel like something the speaker would have turned to in their "reckless[]" younger years. The lack of a rhyme scheme, by contrast, perhaps comes across as more grounded and mature.

SPEAKER

The poem's speaker is someone revisiting love letters from a past relationship. The speaker keeps these letters hidden away most of the time, stashed "in shoeboxes away from the light." Every now and then, however, the speaker takes the letters out to re-read.

It's not that the speaker is still in love with the writer of these letters. On the contrary, the poem makes it clear that the relationship is long over and that the speaker has changed quite a bit. Yet even as the letters now feel silly and sentimental—the "jokes" falling "flat" and the professions of undying love seeming over the top and naive—the speaker still feels moved: their hands still tremble and their "heart thud[s]" while reading these letters. That's because they offer a glimpse of the intense, hopeful emotions the speaker once felt. It's like they allow the speaker to go back in time for a moment and feel all those old, thrilling feelings again.

Notice, too, how the pronouns shift throughout the poem: the poem begins with the speaker talking about how "some" people hide their old love letters, the speaker seeming to distance themselves from this process. Yet soon enough the speaker enters the poem in the first person, admitting in line 3 that the "recklessness" of these letters belongs to the speaker themselves: it is "*My own*..." the speaker says. And in the poem's final stanza, the speaker uses collective pronouns "we" and "us." The feelings described here are experienced by many, the poem thus argues: many people, the speaker included, feel a certain nostalgia for their past loves.

SETTING

The poem doesn't have a specific setting, though readers can imagine scene it describes easily enough: a person pulling an old shoebox out from a dark space—a drawer or the back of a closet, perhaps—lifting the lid, and then tracing their fingers along the old love letters inside. The other thing readers know is that the poem takes place long after these letters were written; the relationship they came from has clearly been over for some time.

Such a scene might take place anywhere, really, and that's the point: the speaker believes that the experience they're describing is something a lot of people can identify with. Lots of people hang on to reminders of relationships that have ended, pulling them out once in a while to relive the feeling of being madly, hopefully in love. The lack of specific details when it comes to the poem's setting allows the reader to fill in the gaps: to imagine themselves in their own home doing the same thing.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

"The Darling Letters" was published in Scottish poet Carol Ann Duffy's 1990 collection, *The Other Country*. This collection, Duffy's third, explores themes related to emigration, language, and the journey from childhood to adulthood. Such themes are reflected in "The Darling Letters," with its nostalgic longing for the intensity of (presumably young) love and its exploration of the ways that one's perspective can shift over time (implicitly, as one matures). Other poems in this collection such as "Originally" and "In Mrs Tilscher's Class" feature similarly thoughtful, poignant musings on time, change, and growing up.

Duffy's poetry is known for being straightforward yet effective, accessible yet insightful. She often writes in free verse and uses relaxed, conversational language—characteristics on display in "The Darling Letters."

This poem, like much of Duffy's work, also falls under the umbrella of lyric poetry. It is musical despite its lack of meter and rhyme, and it expresses the speaker's personal thoughts and feelings in order to illustrate broader themes. The majority of poems written in the latter half of the 20th century, as well as the beginning of the 21st century, belong to the lyric tradition.

Duffy has been influenced by a broad range of poets, from American poet Sylvia Plath to Chilean poet Pablo Neruda. She served as Poet Laureate of Britain from 2009 to 2019, and she writes plays and children's books in addition to poetry.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"The Darling Letters" was published in 1990, but feels relatively timeless. While the speaker of the poem need not be interpreted as Duffy herself, it isn't far-fetched to imagine that the poem is describing Duffy's personal experiences with changing romantic relationships and the nostalgia that hovers around past loves.

While she now openly identifies as a lesbian, at the age of 16 Duffy entered what would become a 12-year relationship with the much older male poet Adrian Henri. Henri was a mentor and inspiration to the young Duffy, but he was also chronically unfaithful. The couple separated in 1982, and it's possible that the speaker's simultaneous tenderness toward and embarrassment surrounding old love letters reflects Duffy's own feelings about her relationship with Henri.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Path to Becoming a Literary Icon — This Guardian article provides a more in-depth look at Duffy's life, including her lifelong ambition to become a poet and the ways in which motherhood has affected her work. (https://www.theguardian.com/books/2002/aug/31/featuresreviews.guardianreview8)
- Duffy's Inspirations and Poetic Process — Watch a livestream of 2020 Q&A with the poet for University of Lincoln. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GOsIKBlX3Gs)
- An Overview of the Poet's Life and Work — Learn more about Duffy's life via Poets.org. (https://poets.org/poet/carol-ann-duffy)
- A Reading of the Poem — Listen to the poem read out loud by English actress Rosamund Pike. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qY5v-Fn806Y)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER CAROL ANN DUFFY POEMS

- Before You Were Mine
- Death of a Teacher
- Education For Leisure
- Head of English
- In Mrs Tilscher's Class
- Little Red Cap
- Medusa
- Mrs Midas
- Originally
- Prayer
- Stealing
- Valentine
- Warming Her Pearls
- War Photographer
- We Remember Your Childhood Well

HOW TO CITE

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CHICAGO MANUAL

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