



the 'bones of birds' & 'nước'
lê thi diem thúy

nhi huỳnh



way. ...ed car park ... with map, "C ... ome of these and ... hen ascend the ... you meet a si ... ead, half ... to ...

the bones of birds



"the bones of birds" summary

- begins with narrator connecting herself running away from home at 16
- delves into narrator's relationship with her father, how she perceives him, telling more of their father's story



"I kept moving as the lilting syllables of my own name fell around me like licks of flame that extinguished on contact, never catching.

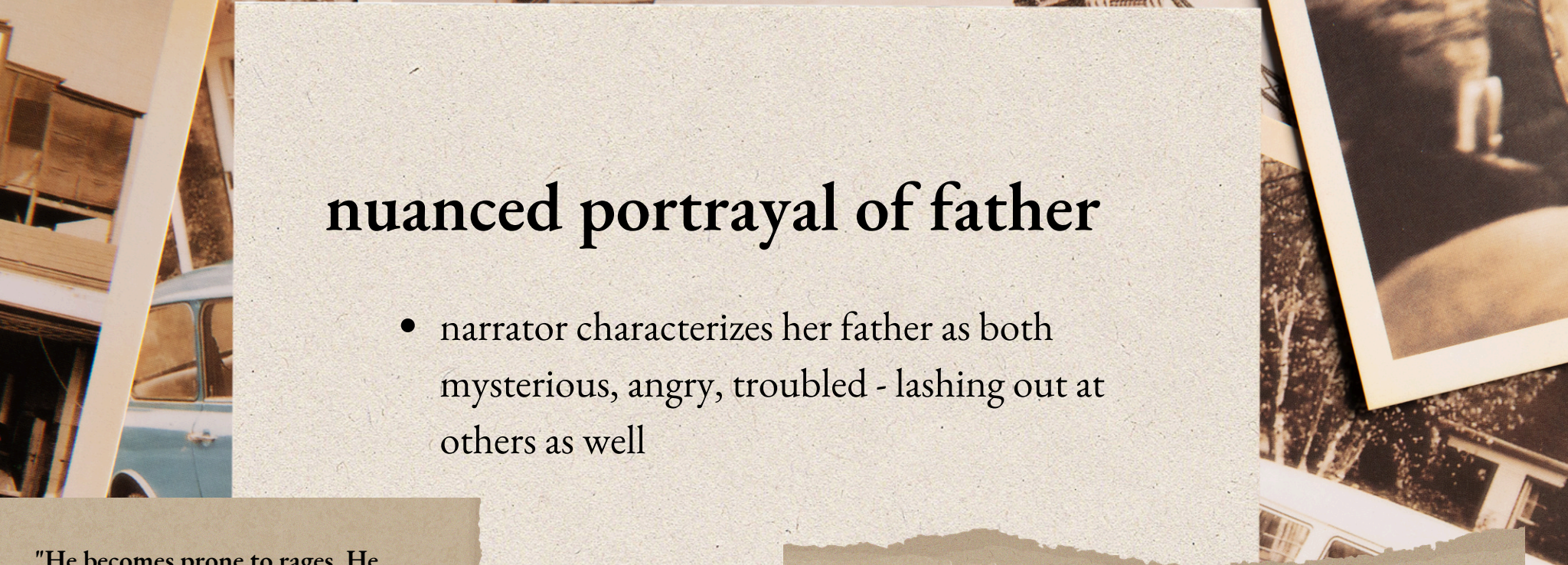
It was my father who taught me how to do this, how to keep moving even when a bone in the leg was broken or a muscle in the chest was torn" (100).

photograph as recurring motif

- lê uses the photograph to reveal something once again not seen by the hidden eye
- used to characterize her father - unwilling to show his weakness



"I have a black-and-white photograph of him at sixteen, in which he wears a hat of canvas camouflage cocked to one side. His expression is wary. His arms are crossed in front of him, bare and luminous, one hand balled into a fist. In this picture, what reveals him most is the will to give nothing away" (103).

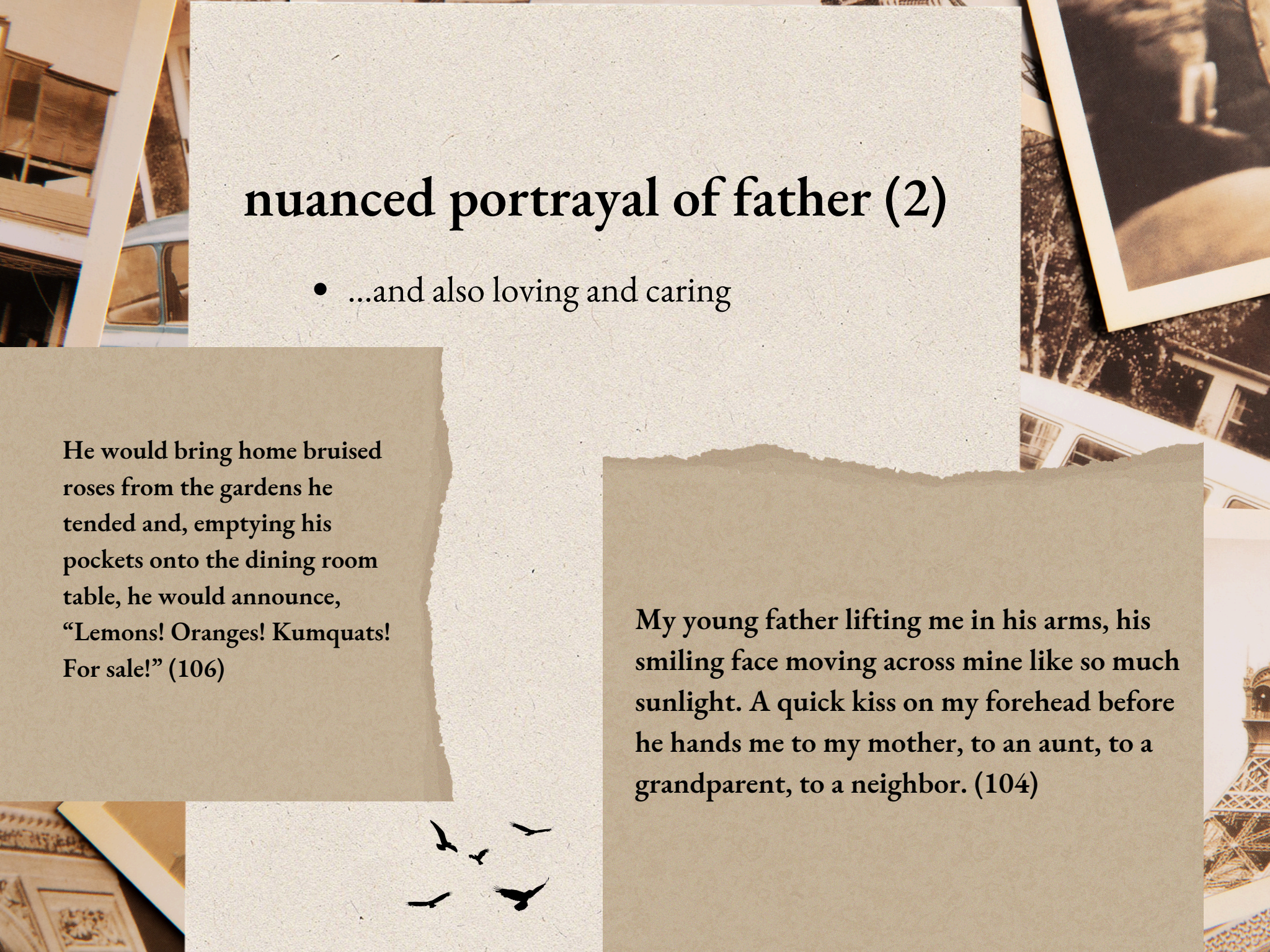


nuanced portrayal of father

- narrator characterizes her father as both mysterious, angry, troubled - lashing out at others as well

"He becomes prone to rages. He smashes televisions, VCRS, chases friends and family down the street, brandishing hammers and knives in broad daylight, Then from night until early morning he sits on the couch in the living room, his body absolutely still, his hands folded on his lap, penitent. He sits in that position for hours, graced by the darkness, straining toward things no one can see (116).

"The rumors about him are mysterious and mundane. Before he was my father, he was a skinny kid in the South Vietnamese army. He was a heroin addict. He was a gangster. He sold American cigarettes on the black market. He cruised girls. He ran away from home. He was part of a select unit trained by the Americans. He jumped out of airplanes and disappeared for weeks into the jungles and hill towns. His friends fell around him, first during the war and then after the war, but somehow he alone managed to crawl here, on his hands and knees, to this life" (103)



nuanced portrayal of father (2)

- ...and also loving and caring

He would bring home bruised roses from the gardens he tended and, emptying his pockets onto the dining room table, he would announce, “Lemons! Oranges! Kumquats! For sale!” (106)

My young father lifting me in his arms, his smiling face moving across mine like so much sunlight. A quick kiss on my forehead before he hands me to my mother, to an aunt, to a grandparent, to a neighbor. (104)

parallels (or not) of father and daughter

- she has examined her father so deeply that she is certain as she grows up she will become like him - physically and mentally



I grew up studying my father so closely as to suggest I was certain I saw my future in him. I would inherit his lithe figure and beautiful smile. I would build and break things with my hands. I would answer to names not my own and be ordered around like a child. I would disappear into every manner of darkness only to awaken amid a halo of faces encircling my body. Shame would crush me. I would turn away from the people I loved... (116)

parallels (or not) of father and daughter

- here, narrator uses what her father has taught her previously but in a different way
- he retreats internally, she retreats externally



Whereas my father would disappear into himself when haunted, I would leap out of windows and run. If there were no windows, I would kick down doors... Yet exactly like my father, I would become suspicious of tenderness and was calmest when I had one hand quietly lying over the other, both ready to be raised in an instant, shattering to the bone whatever dared come too near to me. (117).

ending of "the bones of birds"

- before: had been dancing happily, now she realizes he is crying
 - nuance/multifacetedness of father
- ending sentence mirrors her father in the photograph



I looked away, distracted by the sound of something stirring in the canyon. When I turned back, I saw my father standing quite still, struggling to remain on his feet. His eyes were closed and his body, leadened by drink, twitched, as if he felt suddenly surrounded. He gulped air, and after a while it became the rhythmic hiccuping of someone who has been sobbing for hours.

I stood outside, looking in through the open window. He looked small. I thought of the bones of birds. I thought of a prized pebble in my palm. I closed my hand into a fist and pressed it hard against my body.
(124)

nước



"nước" summary

- interweaves her brother's drowning and her father's story,
- later interweaves narrator coming back to vietnam to her childhood home
- ending with flashback of her family going out into the beach when she was younger

" My father was sitting at the kitchen table watching the evening news when the telephone began to ring. He turned up the volume on the television and focused on the images (125)"

"Twenty years ago, my brother's body was pulled from the South China Sea and left lying on the beach to dry. Friends and relatives encircle him..." (126).

change of the motif of palms/hands

- palms, once used to symbolize holding pain, suffering, tears and more change meaning in "nước"
- father now thinks and wants to use his hands to help; contrasting imagery from previous chapter to now



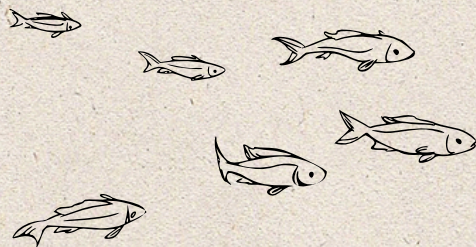
"The nightmare of my return: I find him sitting at the kitchen table, staring out the window... He continues looking out the window and very slowly he slides his hands to the center of the table. They are covered in dirt and horribly swollen. They tremble as he lifts them from the table. It destroys me to see his hands like this..." (the bones of birds, 121).

"Sitting on his porch in Linda Vista he thought about loading all his gardening equipment into his truck. He would drive to wherever she [woman he saw on TV] was and offer her his help, his hands" (157).

"nước" ending

some thoughts:

- she brings life back to the sea when it had earlier brought death to their family
- dog repetition metaphor → earlier had imagined her brother and her together “like dogs sleeping through the heat of midday” (154).
- noticing how it became chunks spaced out to smaller lines



"The beach was covered with small silver fish whose bodies gave off a strange light. My father turned to my mother and me and, smiling broadly, pointed at the fish, as if we knew them

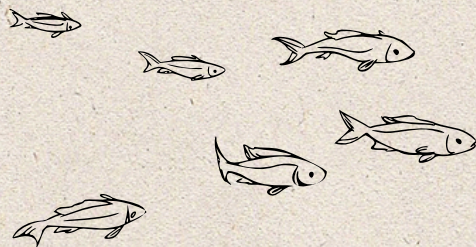
My father remembers stroking my mother's face. My mother remembers wearing my father's coat. I remember taking off my sandals and digging my heels into the wet sand.

As my parents stood on the beach leaning into each other, I ran, like a dog unleashed, toward the lights" (158).

"nước" discussion

some questions to consider:

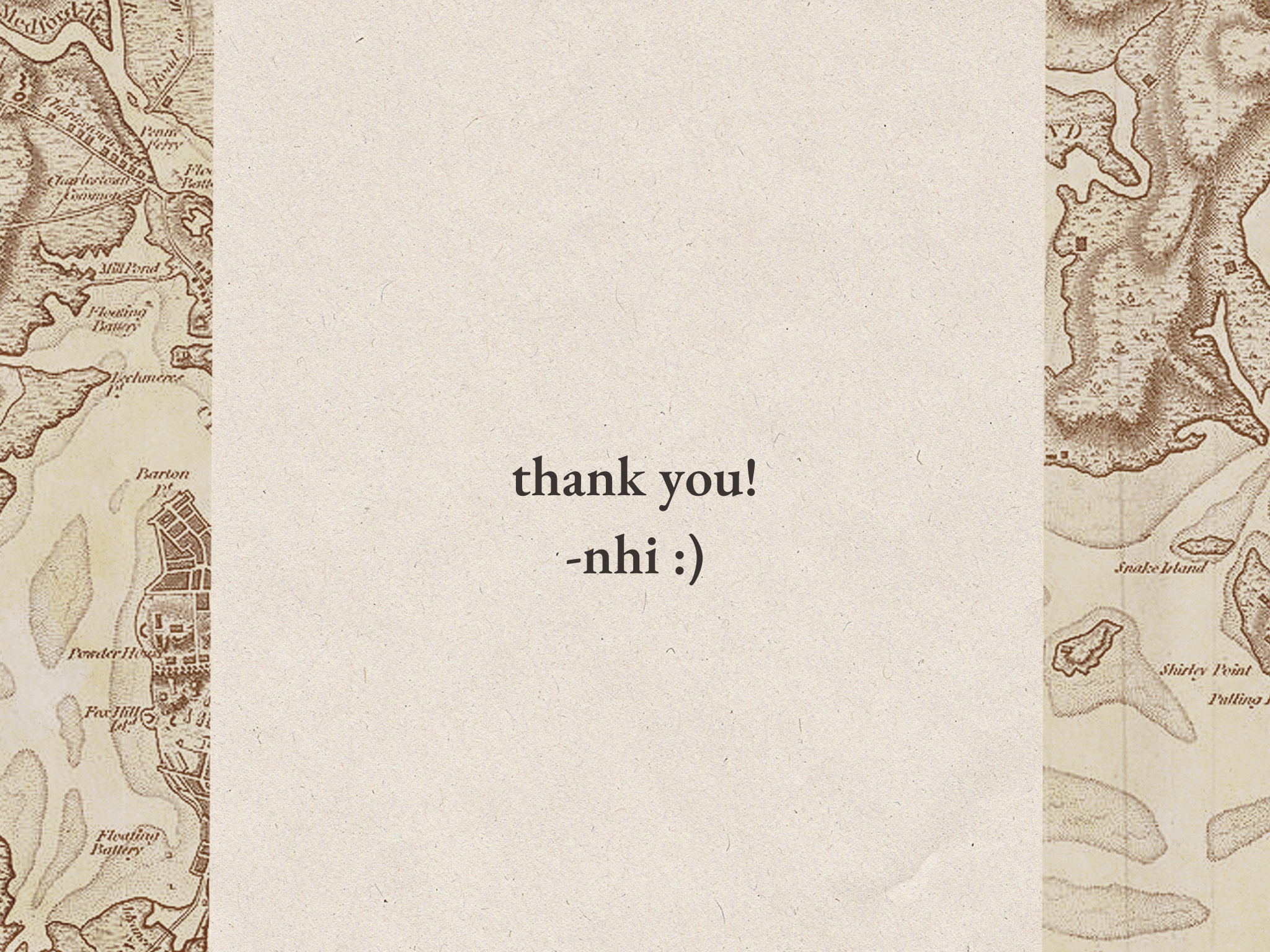
- what do you make of the usage of fish as symbolism appearing at the end? what does it symbolize rather than previous animals we've seen before?
- what strikes you about the ending? how do you interpret the ending?
- other things that struck you about these chapters/ novel as a whole?



"The beach was covered with small silver fish whose bodies gave off a strange light. My father turned to my mother and me and, smiling broadly, pointed at the fish, as if we knew them

My father remembers stroking my mother's face. My mother remembers wearing my father's coat. I remember taking off my sandals and digging my heels into the wet sand.

As my parents stood on the beach leaning into each other, I ran, like a dog unleashed, toward the lights" (158).

A historical map of Fort Mifflin, showing the fort's layout and surrounding areas. The map is oriented with the fort at the top. Labels include "Fort Mifflin", "Perry's Ferry", "Florence Battery", "Mill Pond", "Florence Battery", "Barton Pt.", "Powder House", "Fox Hill", "Florence Battery", "Snake Island", "Shirley Point", and "Pulling". The map is drawn in a sepia tone on a light background.

thank you!
-nhi :)