This poem emphasises the importance of a parent when a child becomes an adult and moves out of the family home. The speaker reassures his mother that she is still needed and that she is crucial to keeping him grounded; not getting metaphorically lost in the wider world.
‘Mother any distance’ by Simon Armitage

Mother, any distance greater than a single span
requires a second pair of hands.
You come to help me measure windows, pelmets, doors,
the acres of the walls, the prairies of the floors.

You at the zero-end, me with the spool of tape, recording
length, reporting metres, centimetres back to base, then
leaving
up the stairs, the line still feeding out, unreeling
years between us. Anchor. Kite.

I space-walk through the empty bedrooms, climb
the ladder to the loft, to breaking point, where something
has to give;
two floors below your fingertips still pinch
the last one-hundredth of an inch... I reach
towards a hatch that opens on an endless sky
to fall or fly.
‘Mother any distance’ by Simon Armitage

Parent and child
The poem examines the idea of growing up. The child is reliant on the parent even as he leaves the parent behind, for he needs the stability and security offered by the relationship. But there comes a time when the child must leave this security behind and live his own life, even if it means failure. In this poem we can see the mother clinging to the tape-measure, the symbol of the bond between them.

Everyday situation
Typically, Armitage uses an everyday setting (organising a house) to convey his ideas about people and relationships. He does not use exotic or far-fetched situations where more mundane ones will do. Again, he looks at things common to most people: parents and the child’s relationship with them; growing up; and ambition.

Sense of place
Armitage gives us a clear sense of place by using the details of measuring and moving up through a house. This then enables him to develop his metaphors.

Excitement and freedom
Becoming more independent is exciting, providing greater freedom. However, there might also be a more pronounced fear of failure as well.
‘Mother any distance’ by Simon Armitage

Language

Metaphors
It is possible to see a number of metaphors in this poem:
- The house - life itself. The enclosed space of the house is safe and can be measured, but the future is much more uncertain and exciting – "endless sky".
- The mother measuring – doing the mundane tasks and providing security.
- Acres of walls; prairies – sense of adventure/freedom.
- Space-walk; endless sky – exciting possibilities in life.
- Tape measure – relationship between mother/son.
- Fall/fly – Opportunities/failure.
- Anchor. Kite – She is the anchor; he is the kite. Kites can fly in a controlled manner, only if they anchored by someone on the ground holding the string. The metaphor of the kite offers another exciting image.

The metaphors lift the poem out of the mundane world of the house to the exciting and unknown.

Rhyme
There is some rhyme in the poem, e.g.: **doors/floors**; and some half-rhyme, e.g.: **recording/leaving/unreeeling**.

The uncertainty of the rhyme adds to the feeling of being unsettled.

Line length
The last, short line perhaps indicates the surprise that the son feels on being confronted with the choice to reach upwards.

Colloquial language
The language is colloquial because it is meant to represent the son talking to his mother – "zero-end", "second pair of hands", "back to base".
‘Mother any distance’ by Simon Armitage

Analysis

"Mother"
A personal poem, directed to a particular person, as suggested by the very first word.

"single span"
A very small distance, suggesting that the poet needs his mother most of the time.

"acres of the walls, the prairies of the floors"
Metaphoric choices of ‘acres’ and ‘prairies’ relate to the natural world, and suggest a huge space much beyond the size of walls and floors. Exaggeration of the task at hand, suggesting the persona feels rather daunted.

"zero-end"
The mother is holding the end of the measuring tape.

"base"
She is his ‘base’, like the operation base of a space mission, somewhere safe that keeps things running smoothly.

"line still feeding out"
They are still connected by the ‘line’ of tape, but it is becoming more than just a tape measure now.

"years"
The tape has become a metaphor for the journey across the years: the distance the boy travels from his mother as he ages, though he is still connected to her.
An anchor keeps a boat secure, which is how he feels about his mum.

He is flying, while she keeps hold of him on the ground: keeping him from going out of control. Although, is there a hint, also, of trying to get away in these image, and the mother being too possessive to let him free?

Picks up on the image of the ‘base’…he is like an astronaut, connected to the ship.

This can be extended beyond the situation of the measuring tape to mean a breaking point in their relationship, picking up the idea of the him trying to strain away while she is clinging on…

The miniscule amount on which she still clutches suggests a clear desperation to keep a hold on him…

Beyond the sky, there is also a sense of the endless opportunities that face the man in the future.

The boy is reaching adulthood, where it is time for him to make his own decisions without his mother’s aid…and whether he will fall or fly is through his choices. It is noticeable, however, that there is no line in the poem where the connection between the mother and the son is severed. Although they have reached breaking point, they are still linked, and have just had to renegotiate their relationship...there is a sense that she will still be there for him, should he fall.