Reading *Psalm:* A Guide

A READER'S COMPANION

for Carol Ann Davis's

PSALM

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Contents

I.

An Introduction to *Psalm*	2
From the Poet: A Note on the Use of Art in the Poems	3
The Grief Daybook Sequence:	
An Overview of *Psalm* in Three Poems	4

II. A Closer Look at Technique:
Two Close Readings, with Discussion Questions

The Death of the Age of Reason:	9
Narrowing a Poem's Meaning from the General to the Specific	
Naming You:	12
A Poem's Movement between the Literal and the Figurative	

III. Appendix

A Short Guide to Reading Poems	14

An Introduction to *Psalm*

Psalm is a collection of poems that traces the period of time between the death of the poet's father and the birth of the poet's first child. As such, it is rich with emotion, and the poet deals with that emotion in a number of ways: by writing narrative poems that chronicle or examine the experience of caring for her sick father or her young child, by writing lyric poems that approach the experience of living with a young child even as she explores the world of artistic expression, and by interacting with works of art in a way that seeks an intimacy and immediacy from the experience, the same kind of immediacy she received from those other big experiences, birth and grief.

The poems are sequenced in such a way as to allow the reader to experience the "story" of the period of time described even as the individual poems seek to refract time and stop to reflect on individual emotions or experiences. It's the poet's hope that these poems are accessible on a number of levels, and that when they are not, the information in this guide will assist readers and deepen their experience of the book.

From the Poet: A Note on the Use of Art in the Poems

In my poems, I hope to set several threads of meaning at work to operate in parallel—parallel's the wrong word: I want those several threads to start to wend their way, and where they end up is anybody's guess. If I'm doing my job all I have to do is follow the tail ends of those associative threads. Once they get going, once association begins to build around a certain image or idea, those threads tend to resonate with each other; in becoming their own fully-formed idea, they speak to other ideas, speak to the history of art, and grief and everything in between. They are metaphysical and also practical. I hope something similar is happening with the way in which art interacts with the other major ideas in the book: love of family, grief, and birth. Art is not, therefore, a handmaiden to these major ideas, but another major idea. It is its own tale of creation, and is at least as essential to my thinking as any other concern. It has a way of transporting me into a metaphysical plane of thought, a place where I can say anything and test it. As a poet, that's where I want to be. If, as Coltrane says, "it all has to do with it," then anything and everything is available for me as an aid in getting down to the business of writing a poem.

It may sound heartless, but every subject I take up is a means rather than an end—it leads on to the next subject, and that one to the next. Every line, if I'm doing my work, opens a new door. It both resonates with what came before it (in the poem, in the history of ideas) and offers its own theory, image, or direction. Because visual art is, for me, the most direct and intimate conduit for such associative trails, I begin there if it presents itself to me. Then, like the magnet on the end of the pen in those children's toys where pieces of tin are gathered together and placed on the man's face under the plastic (eyebrows, a mustache), the art draws slivers of the world to it. They gather and fall according to their nature. They make a unique design. Suddenly I am able to face concerns of the day, the preoccupations or fears I have been unable to name, as in "100 Wild Geese," where the "death of a son" emerges, something I didn't know until I wrote it I feared more than almost anything, or when the nuns in "View of Delft" understand that "where we are/God is not," that most difficult loophole in the definition of faith I had only a vague idea I was concerned with.

It's my job, when I look at a piece art, just to look, and poems often start in straight description of the piece being looked at; if they end there then they haven't gotten very far and I don't put them into a collection. Both of the poems I mentioned above concern themselves with precise description, which is nothing new in poetry, but there are good reasons such techniques endure. Looking, at anything but especially at art, has the potential, I find, to teach me something, and more than anything, I'm in the poem to learn. So I go to art to learn a bit more about the world that surrounds me, its variousness, its gifts, the way in which it turns on itself and becomes interior, even the underwater river of association and history and emotion it is formed from and remains a part of. All of that, what's in the art (whether it's music or a drawing or painting), what I can surmise about the time period or the making of the piece, even what I conjecture about the artist's life (as in the poem for Anna Akhmatova) is fair game so long as I am following it, and it's leading to something else. The other way around (it following me) is a sermon. Let others write those.

I hope that my poems don't rely so heavily on historical or aesthetic association that they can't be understood without it. I am fond of treating high-arty type references as simply

another piece of information, and in a familiar way akin to unpacking a box discovered in one's attic. Things artists have said in letters, which I quote two times that I can think of writing this—in the Johns and Orozco poems—or snippets from biography, which I relied on heavily and kaleidoscopically in "Columbarium," perhaps the most allusive poem in the collection, are simply means of searching inside the poem, and are expressly *not* meant to close any reader out. I mean for them to become a part of the familiar imaginative landscape of the reader and not part of a lecture. I talk about art in that sort of familiar way because it belongs to me, and to the reader, together: it's ours, the artist gave it to everyone equally. It belongs to us. Because it's ours together, it's a place for us to meet up; it's not unlike grief or birth or the search for a god in its universality. In a very real sense I feel we have the right, even the responsibility, to live it deeply and love it well, and that's what I hope the poems do with art: love it well. Our shared world is here, inside us. Making that art is part of what we do to communicate with each other. That's how I feel about my poems, and I like to think that must be what Johns, Cornell, Orozco, Ma Fen, Evans, Reinhart, Vermeer, Schulz, Memling, Fra Angelico had in mind, too. I don't want such references to cause people to run to their Wikipedia. I want those references to remain part of the landscape of the world. Whatever the reader imagines of those pieces of art is theirs to seek. And that imaginative seeking is far superior to Wikipedia. It's art itself.

The Grief Daybook Sequence: An Overview of *Psalm* in Three Poems

Three poems in this collection share a title: Grief Daybook. The title comes from the idea of a diary or sketchbook, something someone might keep every day as a way of tracking his or her impressions of each day; "daybooks" have been kept over the years by visual artists as places to sketch ideas, and this also relates to the inspiration and meaning the poet has found in visual art throughout the experience of grief. Each daybook poem (I, II, and III) takes a moment in the everyday experience of grieving and holds it up for examination, and each poem takes a different poetic strategy. The first poem works with an initial moment of consciousness and describes it, the second describes a photograph (Evans' "Gulf of Mexico") in light of grief, and the third does the same with a piece of music (Coltrane's "A Love Supreme"). That these poems appear periodically throughout the manuscript helps to knit together the theme of grief, but also provides useful roadmap to tracking how the speaker's experience of grief changes from poem to poem as, presumably, time passes. The poems could be usefully discussed and compared and contrasted because they each examine grief to different ends. Because of their announcement of subject and the way in which they weave other themes from the book into themselves (discussions about art, aesthetics, and religious devotion), the poems serve as useful guideposts in the organization of the book.

"Grief Daybook I," which appears as the sixth poem in the collection, examines the immediate weeks after the burial of the father—the speaker wonders "what is it to be long dead, dead a week, /a year?"—and imagines moving out from those early weeks and into a life without the loved one; the blankness of such imagining has her imagining its opposite as well, and she ends the poem imagining the visitors to her own grave. Surely it's a part of grief to simply want to *go with* the person who's left us here on this earth—in another poem, "Feast Day Elegy," the speaker sides with the disciple Thomas, who, upon hearing of Christ's crucifixion, says as simply as a child, "let us all go to die with him"—and here, early on in the collection, "Grief Daybook I" sets that scene: during the course of the book we will be accompanied by a person asking questions of the dead, questions she knows will remain unanswered but in the asking will somehow create a forward motion, allow her (perhaps, she's doubtful) to move into time, "a thing covered/in seconds."

The strategy of "Grief Daybook I," its effort to stay in the everyday world of ongoing grief and to examine its parts, the "long apparatus of a thought" that leaves "twigs" and "orange juice" in its wake as well as "papers still heavy/with requests," establishes the sense that carries throughout many poems of the simultaneity of grieving with living. The speaker is never very far from her own thoughts, which pull her back to questions about the afterlife, but nonetheless, she is also in the present moment and beholden to it. It's a desire to "drive the six hours home/just to touch the stone//over [her] father's heart," but it remains simply that. "Grief Daybook I," coming early in the collection, establishes the freshness of grief, its physical reality (the closest the speaker can get to the father is to physically lay down on the grave), and an opening up of the larger metaphysical questions that accompany grief. For instance, the speaker says, "what is the heart/ but a request?"

"Grief Daybook II" describes in great detail a Walker Evans photograph, and at first glance seems to have very little to do with grief itself. The first three sentences seem simply bent on describing the photograph. This descriptive passage ends with "its roots pull/at sand, as

if to say/*this is what it takes*." Here the objective description is arrested by a speaker speaking in the first person in much the same voice as "Grief Daybook I": "I'd believe, if not for the way//my breath catches,/if not for the wild faint/sleep's become." Although the poem returns to objective description of the photograph after this point, the reader has been made aware of the speaker's doubts, doubts that will continue to arise as the photograph, in the speaker's eyes "means to prove the existences/of the world." It seems that the speaker, in her grief, looks to the photograph for some proof of the existence of the world, as well as for god. The poem ends with the light in the photograph, the "latticework of 1934" "pulling around [her] in this light//as if to say *my god my god,*//a hymn sung/by infidels to believers/as a way to ask for water."

This ending is perhaps the most difficult part of the poem—it is the place where the poem seems to turn towards larger concerns (is there a god, is he merciful, who believes, who doesn't), and only those earlier hints of doubt in the speaker's description and the occasional admission ("I'd believe") that her beliefs are being tested prefigure the moment. Within the context of the first "Grief Daybook" poem, however, one sees that she is forwarding the line of questioning begun there: farther off from the death, time having passed, the speaker still has trouble sleeping, and has progressed from her earlier simple questions about the heart to a larger world of doubt. Art allows her to ask fundamentally about the nature of god, its relation to need, and the nature of belief itself. In this poem, the speaker is in the thick (and the stasis) of her grief; it's as if remaining in that moment causes a sort of creature-need to emerge (something that shows up in other poems such as "An Understanding between Living and Dead" when she says she's "animal"), and causes belief systems, held in place perhaps as objective truths (like the photograph's objective description) emerge changed by the "chemical bath" of loss.

"Grief Daybook III" is shorter than the other two, and appears towards the end of the collection; it is the third-to-last poem. Its opening, "Today it's like water in the ear, a slow bleed in the brain," is a description of how the grief feels "today" to the speaker. Starting that way acknowledges that grief changes daily, and the speaker's willingness to speak about it so casually and familiarly indicates she's lived with it longer than in the previous two poems. Unlike in "Grief Daybook II," where the photograph seems to provide a distraction or a foil for the grief which interrupts description with its insistent doubts, here the music, and Coltrane's "liner-note prayer—*it all has to do with it*," seem to provide a bit of acceptance and even continuity with the speaker's deepening experience of grief.

Perhaps that acceptance is also present because of the "drumbeat of another pulse in [her]." Here, for the first time, the speaker listens for the pulse of her unborn child, and seems to believe in something without having to see it, the very definition of faith: "it's there, but I can't hear it." In a poem about music, it's what she can't hear that restores her faith in the concrete, living world. At this point, she's able to let go of the grief she's been carrying. She no longer imagines the father underground with a stone above his heart (as in "Grief Daybook I"), but in some unseeable afterlife, the kind of place she doubted existed in "Grief Daybook II." Now she's able to say: "where you've gone, there will be a whole night sky of psalms," and she's able to admit "there's hardly anything/left of you now" without that admission throwing the world into doubt.

This triptych of poems can be examined, as it has been here, for thematic similarities: it traces the experience of grief from its onset to its acceptance, and makes room for the doubt that accompanies all three stages. It's also an aesthetic guidebook, as the poet employs several different strategies here that she pursues throughout the collection: art is often a refraction of her own family life and a way to examine not only the past but the future in metaphysical, sometimes surreal, terms; the present moment telescopes into a sort of strange, private reality on the back of the simplest image; the image itself is a way in which to begin a precise examination of experience. Each of these techniques is present elsewhere in the book, and these poems can be a useful way to begin to unpack the layers of meaning present in the other poems which connect back to the experience not only of grief, but also of the examination and the consideration of various art forms.

A Closer Look at Technique:
Two Close Readings, with Discussion Questions

The Death of the Age of Reason: Narrowing a Poem's Meaning from the General to the Specific

This poem uses an ancient form—the litany—to examine the speaker's feelings surrounding the events of a loved one's death (in point of fact her father's, though that is never mentioned in the poem, and the poem applies to the grief anyone feels at the death of a love one); she begins with the broader idea of death, making large statements about mortality itself and the world as it appears to her, then slowly narrows the focus to a "he" in the middle of the poem, then finally to a "you" as the speaker confronts the full impact of her loss. Throughout the poem, the speaker uses the word "because" in order to exert a sort of false control over the grief, and also to pretend an answer will be found to the problem of death.

The litany form, a form of prayer recitation in which the same word is repeated to a congregation by a speaker and then answered by the congregation, adds in the beginning to the ancient, prayerful tone of the opening general statements, and toward the middle and end of the poem adds to its emotional and personal resonance: this is a litany with no congregant, a prayer without hope of answer. That the litany is the word "because" and that the answers given after that word are so inadequate makes the specific accounts of the dead one's life that much more resonant when they are introduced late in the poem. With the question that accompanies their telling, the speaker seems to wonder whether such a list can add up to anything in the face of her own private grief.

Throughout the poem, the speaker repeats several sentences in a row that begin with the same word, because, but even though that word often proceeds the answer to a question, no answers really follow the repeated "becauses". In fact, the reader is not even aware until quite late in the poem, when the specific events of the death are given, that the poem narrates a death. The poem begins at its most opaque and moves towards a clear telling of the death. Its first sentence, because of this strategy, offers more questions than it answers:

Because I am equal parts salt and dust
solutions are hard to come by.

All we know from these lines is that the speaker is feeling as elemental as dust (we are reminded by these lines that we all return to dust). We also know that, because "solutions are hard to come by," the speaker will not be giving answers behind the "because" but rather complicating the world further. That "solutions" is also a term of science—as is "equal parts"—reinforces the idea that humans are made of the physical world and will return to it while it reminds the reader that the speaker may try to control her experience through the use of logic or scientific method.

The poem continues with such aphoristic statements, statements of generality based on a logic that nonetheless specifies very little, for three stanzas, until in the fourth the speaker suddenly seems to bear some blame for all this uncertainty:

Because I did not keep it well

it prefigures itself.

Here is the first of the narrowing gestures: the I bears some responsibility, but the aphoristic quality of the poem continues to elude specific assignment of objects. For instance, a noun in the place of "it" would give the reader information that would apparently narrow the focus too extremely. The reader is therefore not sure what the speaker has not kept "well"—"it" is not yet sufficiently specified. In the next sentence, "gravesites" and more of the speaker's self-blame ("because I did not think") narrow the poem down further: the speaker feels guilt at not being attentive, and this guilt is associated with a death. In the very next stanza, a "he" emerges, and the poem is no longer concerned with the metaphysical "solution" or the "prefiguring" of an unspecified abstraction: it is concerned with the life and character of a single man.

Now that the poem has narrowed its focus, the specific events (that the day the father died nurses passed in the halls, and her father's "son recount[ed]/the events of his life aloud") are told in a straightforward way, as are the descriptions of the kind of man the father was: "he was a man—/sat in chairs, hated fish,/folded our clothes." Here, it's interesting to note that as the passages become more specific, the litany form breaks down a bit—the speaker repeats "because, because" at the end of the sentence rather than at the beginning and that placement offers not even the general answer the reader's come to expect from the structure of the sentences thus far. This repetition of because marks a sort of turning point in the poem as the litany form drops entirely out of the poem, and the speaker seeks real, specific, detail about the death scene, asking "it happened just this way,//didn't it?" For three stanzas, the events are narrated in concrete terms, no asking for answers or metaphysical underpinnings, just "the still/of tide shift//and two o'clock."

When the speaker returns to the litany form in the final couplet, she is no longer focused on what she has *not* done, as she was when the broader, more general question of death loomed early in the poem and she "did not keep it well" and "did not think." Having sufficient narrowed her focus and examined the death in all its purity, it's her *action* that causes the most grief to her, as if she could have stopped the death by being *less* attentive as the poem ends:

Because I worried over you
you were taken from me.

This is the point in the poem where the specific events of the death are allowed to impact both speaker and reader. The form returns here, but it is made newly intimate: this is the point at which the "he" disappears and becomes "you." As the speaker claims responsibility for her role in the death, the death becomes intimately real to her—she's lost not a "he" but a "you." The poem has moved from the universal to the specific death, and the reader feels the grief that much more for the narrowing of the poem's focus.

Discussion Questions:

1. The poem uses an ancient form, the litany, in a contemporary way. Research the litany form and compare this poem to a more traditional one.

2. The poem that immediately precedes this one in the book, "I Wanted It So," also uses a repeating line to begin the poem and uses "it" in a nonspecific way. Is that poem similarly moving from the general to the specific, from the symbolic to the concrete? How are the two poems similar and different?

3. The poem increases in intimacy as it moves forward. Track the pronouns as they move through the poem—I, you, it, we, he—and see if you can find any patterns that reflect the move from the general to the specific.

4. Do the images and ideas described in the first half of the poem have any relationship with those described in the second half (after the "I" does not "think")? Do they come from the same "world" of association, or different ones? How do they speak to each other?

Naming You:
A Poem's Movement between the Literal and the Figurative

Unlike realistic fiction, which necessarily confines itself to the realm of the literal, of what actually happens in a given story, a poem more easily moves between literal and figurative realms, describing the literal events alongside their more figurative and emotionally resonant cousins. In other words, a poem might describe an event and also—in the interest of fully exploring the emotion behind an event, its engines and driving ideas—spend time letting pile up inside the literal all the symbolic, figurative, or connotative power of that same event. It moves easily between these two realms, creating both a dizzying effect (what's real, what isn't?) and giving the poem the layered feeling of fully lived experience.

In "Naming You," the literal event is straightforward: the poet is addressing the "you" (her son Willem, as the dedication for the poem states), and explaining to him the circumstances by which he was named. "Before you were named," the poem begins, setting up for the son the circumstances that existed "before" him, what his mother's life was like in the immediate days before his arrival, when she was thinking of his name. That's the literal part, but the poem moves swiftly to the figurative in the same sentence, when the speaker states, "before you were named, you came in a white boat." The boat, and what follows, "it was the first of many crossings/in which grief held a sprig/of olive," is almost entirely figurative: the child does not, of course, come on a boat—perhaps this is a metaphor for how the speaker feels (big as a house) during pregnancy, or simply a metaphor for birth as a passage or journey. That second idea, the idea of birth as passage and journey (again, employed more as metaphor than as realistic image) seems to lead the reader seamlessly into the idea of the "crossing" mentioned in the next sentence; this image extends the boat's journey inside the figurative rather than literal life of the poem. Now the you is "crossing" something, and because this is the "first" of "many" crossings, the reader is given idea that perhaps one is continuously reborn, or that the act of naming (and so of being born) happens only slowly, over time.

Perhaps it's not surprising that it's here, within the resonance of these figurative images, of metaphor employed to explore feeling, that the poet infuses into the poem what becomes (as the poem moves forward) one of the abiding ideas of the poem, one of the layers that seems to cut the sweetness of the joy of the birth: the fact that "grief" is nearby holding a "sprig of olive." Here more figuration is employed: grief is, in the literal sense, not a person, and cannot hold a "sprig of olive." But it seems the speaker, even in her joy and anticipation at the "first" experiences she and Willem will have, is also haunted by grief, something that seems to have accompanied each "crossing." That grief holds a sprig of olive on the one hand for the reader is a relief, because it is a concrete in a world of figurative and abstract language, but at the same time, it operates symbolically: to hold out an olive branch is to surrender, as perhaps the birth of this child will do to grief. Perhaps grief will surrender to birth, but as of yet, the speaker finds herself in between these experiences. Before the birth and after the death (of someone unnamed, just as the you is unnamed), the poem is moving between two worlds, just as she's asking the reader to do in moving him or her—shuttling, really—between the literal and the figurative.

In just the first stanza of the poem, then, the reader is given this abiding mode of transport within the poem: the poem will move freely between the figurative and the literal. The poem will take that as an abiding strategy to describe the limbo in which the speaker finds herself, grieving the loss of someone even as she anticipates the arrival of another. One way of approaching the poem, then, is to map what's literally happening, and then add to that what is happening around those events by way of the figurative, resonant language that accompanies the literal. The reader will find the poem moves freely between these two realms, so that the "train" at the end of the poem is both a child's play thing and a very real symbol for the speaker's own fear of the dangers the child will face as moves through his life.

Discussion Questions:

1. Having seen how the first two sentences shuttle between the literal and the figurative, examine how this device works in the next two sentences: what is literal and figurative, and how do both seem to work together to create the layered effect of lived experience? How do the two lines after that?

2. Flannery O'Connor has famously said that fictions is "literal in the way a child's drawing is literal," and she goes on to describe clouds outlined with a big black outline to designate themselves clouds. She is talking about a literal that includes the resonant, a literal that, like a child's drawing, *approximates* reality rather than truly representing it. This poem does something similar. Where do you think the poem's approximations of reality get closer to the real than a more specific, reportorial version of events would?

3. Time, and how it works, seems to be a preoccupation in this poem. The poem begins "before" the you was named, and describes a world that is "gone now." Map the time references in the poem to see how they work to lead into the future the poem anticipates in the final lines.

4. The poet mentions grief early in the poem and later seems to mourn a world that is mostly gone. Later, she doubts the child she's addressing has "feet", even as she mentions the "100 names for god." Are these images related to the grief she feels? How does her uncertainty about her child's physical characteristics (whether feet and eyes are really forming) related to the images that come directly before and after that? (Remain aware of the figurative and literal aspects of the images in order to puzzle this out.)

5. This poem has much in common with Sylvia Plath's "Metaphors," another poem that approaches the experience of pregnancy with figurative language. Read the poems side by side to see what they have in common.

Appendix:
A Short Guide to Reading Poems

Look at the first few lines for how they seem to be operating (form and craft): A poem's form and craft will tell you a lot about how to read it in the first few lines. Don't worry too much if you don't know the technical terms for what's going on. Just take a look at the first sentence or two: does the poem seem to be more concrete or abstract? Does it introduce images, or ideas, or both? Does it tell a story or seem to elicit a feeling right away? Does it operate outside of time or narrate a story inside time? What's literally happening in the poem? What do you notice about the poem's shape or the way the sentences are working? Notice anything unusual inside the way the language is working.

Let the opening lines guide further reading: Having asked and answered these questions, you will find that the first lines of the poem set its tone and its operating mode. That mode will either continue or it won't—where it breaks down or changes may be an important clue to the poem's "turn," the point in the poem where the poem seems to broaden its view or become more emotional. You will be able to keep track of important movements of ideas in the poem by isolating the poem's initial formal patterns in these early lines and tracking how they change during the poem's progression.

Consider the title: Having read these initial lines and gotten your bearings inside the poem, reread the title. How has reading the first few lines of the poem helped you to unpack the title? Or the opposite may be true: the title may help to answer a question you had in reading the first few lines. If doing so doesn't help the poem's meaning emerge, read the next full sentence of the poem and then reread the title. This is a technique that you can use at any time during the reading of the poem.

Who's speaking? In poems, the speaker is not the poet, but there's a speaker nonetheless, and he or she is guiding you through the poem. That speaker may not always use a personal pronoun like "I" or "you," but the speaker is there, moving through the poem, guiding your reading. The speaker is just that, a guide, and you can make yourself more comfortable in the poem just by noting who it is that's speaking and where they seem to be headed. Is the poem addressed to everyone, or to a specific person? Is the speaker solving a problem, writing a letter, describing an event, or something else? Are there other actors in the poem besides the speaker? Keep track of the pronouns being used in the poem and see how they change during the course of the poem.

Note the type of language being used: Poems use all kinds of normal, unpoemlike words, and they also sometimes use an elevated or formal language. Sometimes a poem will use several different types of language, called registers of language, in the very same poem. Take a look at where the poem is easy to understand and uses everyday language, and where it doesn't. This could have something to do with the turn.

Pay attention to repetition: A lot of different aspects of language repeat in poems: sounds, words, ideas, even the structures of sentences. When things repeat in poems, they're being emphasized. Sometimes they're even changing as they're emphasized. Perhaps a certain image appears in the beginning of a poem, and it appears at the end as well. Look around both of those placements to see what's different. What changes may be as important as what stays the same.

Ask questions but keep reading: Keep track of your questions as you move through the poem, but don't let the fact that answers may not be readily available stop you from continuing to read. Poems often enjoy and accommodate uncertainties better than prose—remember Dickinson's idea that poems "dwell in possibility/a finer house than prose"—and so you may find that the poem is operating by asking questions rather than providing answers. If you can, enjoy these "possibilities"—though the answer may be less certain, the layers of experience added to the discussion have their own pleasures, and by the end of the poem, there will be some closure, even if it's an open question.

Enjoy the compression of language: Although poems can be conversational, they often use language in a different way than we're used to reading it in stories or speaking in conversation. Remember that every word is working double-time in poetry, both to move the poem along and to resonate with other language or images within its sphere. This may mean that more than one dictionary definition of a word is in use at a given time. Although the poem should make sense on the surface, poems that use a lot of compressed language also make sense on several levels, giving the poem a layered feeling. Because the poem must work on the surface as well as underneath its surface, you don't worry you'll "miss" something—but if you think something else is there, you may be right. A poem aims to approximate an experience, and experience has many layers.

How does the poem end? A poem has to stop somewhere, and where it stops bears a relationship to all the elements building in the poem up to that point. Use all the questions you've asked up to now to examine the end of the poem. Look at its formal elements. Look at who's speaking—who literally gets the last word. Look at whether it ends on an image or an idea. And having done so, let the questions go until there's only one remaining: how does it make you feel? In the end, in poetry, that's all that matters—that's the layered experience the poem aims to include the reader in.