

3: READING A POEM

Meeting a poem for the first time? Feeling slightly nervous? Here's a simple guide to breaking the ice.

1. **Slow down.** Read slowly. A good poet will have made every word in the poem count. Step into the poem and wander around. Take your time.
2. **Taste.** As you might a good wine, or a chocolate. Give it time to breathe. Let it dissolve on the tongue. Then, taste it all over again, like you would take another sip of that wine, another chocolate. Yes, reading a poem is a sensual experience. Enjoy it. Savour each word, each phrase, each turn of a line. Seek out its pleasures, its mysteries.
3. **Linger.** Like you might with a new companion. What mood is the poem in? Let the poem start to unwind in your presence. Let yourself unwind. Begin a conversation with the poem. See where the encounter takes you.
4. **Don't worry.** You might not like the poem. It might do nothing for you. Don't feel under any pressure to like every poem you meet. You won't.
5. **Relax.** Hmm... the poem has got you intrigued? But you don't understand it. Not to worry. Poems aren't crossword puzzles. There's no correct answer. A good poem will offer many paths to meander along.

The spaces in the poem are yours.
They are the place where you
Can enter as yourself alone
And think anything in.

W S Graham, from 'Private Poem to Norman MacLeod' in *New Collected Poems* (Faber, 2004)

6. **First impressions.** What caught your eye when you first encountered the poem? What drew you to it? Which parts of it are lingering in your mind? What are the questions that it makes you want to ask? What do you want to ask of it? Big questions, little questions, either are okay.
7. **Listen.** How does the poem sound? Are there patterns? Repeated sounds? Strange words? Long words, short words? Who's speaking? It's okay to use a dictionary.
8. **Look.** How does the poem look on the page? Long lines, or interesting line breaks? Is it a well-clipped hedge or a rambling rose? Is it a set of neat flower beds, or a free-flowing meadow? It's okay to be inquisitive, nosy.
9. **Ponder.** Start to bring it all together. Is the whole greater than the parts? What is your personal response to the poem? What do you like or dislike about it?
10. **Reflect.** Where has the poem taken you? How did it get you there? What has it allowed you think?

