Long Distance II

SUMMARY

Years after the speaker's mother died, his father was still heating her slippers in front of the gas stove, using hot water bottles to warm the side of the bed she'd slept on, and making sure that her transportation card was up to date.

The speaker says that you weren't supposed to just show up at his father's house unannounced but rather had to call ahead. That way, his father could make up an excuse that would buy him enough time to put his wife's things away and make it look like he was living by himself. It was as though the intensity of his continued love for her were something terribly wrong.

He was afraid that the speaker's acceptance of his mother's death would infect him, too. He believed that, any minute, he'd hear her unlocking the door and his misery would be over, convinced as he was that she'd just stepped briefly out to fetch some tea.

The speaker, for his part, insists that death is the end of life and that's that. He knows that his parents aren't just running errands. Still, he admits that he added his father's contact information to his new address book, and that he still calls his father's old phone number even though he can no longer reach him.

THEMES

DEATH, GRIEF, AND DENIAL

The speaker of "Long Distance II" describes his father's inability to accept his mother's death. Two years after the loss of his wife, the speaker's father was still keeping her "slippers warm[]" and "renew[ing] her transport pass." The speaker, who "believe[s] life ends with death, and that is all," didn't share his father's delusions that his mother would return to them. And yet, at the end of the poem, the speaker admits that he still calls his now-deceased father's "disconnected" phone number from time to time. The poem thus relays the power of grief to make people behave in ways that don't always make sense and to search for comfort in irrational places. Denial is a natural part of the grieving process, the poem suggests, because it's difficult and painful to wrap one's head around the finality of death.

A full "two years" after the speaker's mother died, his father was still taking care of her—warming her slippers and sheets, keeping her travel documents up to date, and so on. These weren't just moments of forgetfulness but rather stemmed from his father's refusal—or, perhaps, inability—to accept that his wife was really gone. He had convinced himself that "she'd just popped out" for a moment and that any minute "he'd hear her key" in the door.

In fact, the speaker says, his father was so committed to this fantasy that "You couldn't just drop in." You'd have to call ahead "to give him time / to clear away her things and look alone." This suggests that the father *knew* how irrational his behavior appeared to others but that self-awareness wasn't enough to stop him from doing these things.

The speaker also says his father "couldn't risk [the speaker's] blight of disbelief"—that is, he didn't want to be tainted by his son's refusal to play into the fiction that his mother had just stepped "out to get the tea." Part of being in denial, the poem suggests, is protecting oneself from the truth.

The speaker, for his part, harbors no such delusions about death; he insists that death is the end, and "that is all." Yet in the last stanza, the speaker admits that he finds it difficult to accept that his father is now dead. The speaker goes from talking about his father in the third person to addressing him and his mother directly, saying, "You haven't both gone shopping." In other words, unlike his father, the speaker understands and accepts that his parents are gone for good.

Even so, the speaker "still call[s]" his father's "disconnected number." Though he understands that his father is dead, that doesn't stop him from trying to reach him. He may not be in the same full-blown denial that his father was, but he is able to relate to his father's behavior. The speaker is able to find some solace, the poem suggests, in accepting that his grief won't always make sense.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-16

THE PERSISTENCE OF LOVE

"Long Distance II" is a poem as much about love as it is about grief. The speaker's father tends to his wife years after her death; the speaker himself keeps calling his father's "disconnected number" when the latter dies. Both men's actions clearly stem from their love for their family. Such love doesn't simply fade away when people die, the poem implies. Instead, it lingers, becoming a testament to the deep, enduring bonds that families share.

The father's actions in the years after his wife's death reflected his continued desire to take care of her. That he kept "her slippers warm[]" and "put hot water bottles" on her side of the bed reveals that he wanted to make her comfortable and

happy; a lifetime of doing so didn't just evaporate overnight. While it's true that he was protecting himself by refusing to fully accept that she was gone, the specific nature of his actions conveys just how much he still loved her. He kept "her things" around him, readers can assume, because he didn't want a life without her. And although she had been dead for years, his love was "still raw"—it didn't dull with time.

The fact that the speaker calls his father's disconnected number conveys his own love for his family. The speaker understands that his parents "haven't both gone shopping"—that is, they haven't just stepped out to run errands and they are never coming back. But while the speaker seems more aware of the irrationality of his actions than his dad was, the act of calling conveys his intense longing to hear his father's voice again. He misses his father enough to momentarily convince himself, or at least *try* to convince himself, that he's still alive. Denial is an act of self-preservation, but it also is an illustration of deep, enduring love.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-4
- Line 8
- Lines 14-16

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

Though my mother ...
... her transport pass.

"Long Distance II" is a continuation of an earlier poem Harrison wrote about his father, called "Long Distance I." The speaker begins by recalling his father's grief after his wife (the speaker's mother) died:

> Though my mother was already two years dead
> Dad kept her slippers warming by the gas,

These opening lines illustrate the father's deep love for his wife, a love that didn't just dissipate when he lost her. While she was alive, he was thoughtful and considerate toward her. For example, he kept her slippers warm for her in chilly weather, so her feet wouldn't be cold in the morning. ("The gas" here refers to a gas stove or heater in their home.) But he didn't—or couldn't—stop trying to take care of her after she died. Even "years" later, he kept going through these familiar motions. He didn't just momentarily forget that his wife was gone; he actively strove to keep her memory alive by behaving as if she were still there.

Notice how /d/ alliteration and consonance create a slant, internal rhyme between "dead" and "Dad." This connection highlights both the poem's subject (the speaker's father) and its central theme (death and grief).

The speaker's father kept doing other things for his late wife as well. He slid "hot water bottles" into the side of the bed where she once slept, as if she might still want the covers warm, and "went to renew her transport pass," as if she might still use it for travel. Indeed, it seems that although his wife had been dead for quite some time, his life still revolved around her.

The poem is a Meredithian sonnet: a 16-line variation on the traditional 14-line sonnet, pioneered by the Victorian poet George Meredith. Its 16 lines are split into four quatrains (four-line stanzas) that follow an ABAB rhyme scheme (with the exception of the last stanza, which follows an ABBA rhyme scheme). The structured stanzas and rhyme scheme make the poem inviting, musical, and easy to read. Harrison was known for using increasingly direct, colloquial language as his career went on, and this poem showcases the accessibility he strove for in his work.

LINES 5-8

You couldn't just ...
... such a crime.

In the second stanza, the speaker continues to describe his father's deep grief:

> You couldn't just drop in. You had to phone.

In other words, his father didn't want him, or anyone, to stop by the house on the spur of the moment. Notice the use of anaphora (the repetition of "You"), as well as the caesura in the middle of the line. These effects create clipped, repetitive sentences that convey the speaker's frustration with his father.

He then explains that his father would "put you off an hour to give him time / to clear away her things and look alone." In other words, he knew what others would think of his attachment to his dead wife—that is, his inability to accept her loss and move on. His impulse to hide this behavior from others shows that he understood how irrational it was. He felt ashamed of "his still raw love," as if it were some sort of "crime." The simile illustrates not only the father's shame but also the kind of judgmental attitudes many grieving people face. Although there's no set timeline for healing from a loss, bereaved people are often made to feel as if their lingering grief is somehow wrong.

Lines 6-7 are enjambed, and line 7 omits a comma at the end, even though it's grammatically end-stopped:

> He'd put you off an hour to give him time
> to clear away her things and look alone
> as though his still raw love were such a crime.

These effects speed the poem up, evoking the father's haste to "clear away [his wife's] things" when people came over. Besides

revealing his "still raw love" and his shame over his lingering attachment, these lines suggest that the father didn't feel comfortable being vulnerable with his son. While the poem mostly deals with the father's grief over his wife, it also hints at the tense relationship between the speaker and his "Dad." The father's inability to share his true feelings with his son might even have hindered him from moving forward with his life.

LINES 9-12

He couldn't risk ...
... get the tea.

The third stanza explains that the father would hide his wife's things before his son came over because he "couldn't risk [his son's] blight of disbelief." A "blight" is a plague or disease, so this metaphor implies that the father feared emotional *contamination*. In other words, if the speaker saw the deep denial his father was living in, his "disbelief" would be infectious, and his father would be forced to come to terms with his wife's death.

On some level, then, the father was protecting himself from the truth. He didn't *want* to believe that his wife was gone. And while he knew how irrational he looked to others, he remained "sure that very soon he'd hear her key / scrape in the rusted lock and end his grief." That is, he deluded himself into believing she wasn't really dead. With rueful irony, the speaker says that his father "knew she'd just popped out to get the tea." Of course, she had done no such thing.

Anaphora (the repetition of "He" in lines 9 and 12) creates a layering effect, as the speaker adds fresh details to his psychological portrait of his father. The enjambment across lines 10-11 ("hear her key / scrape") creates a short, suspenseful pause, evoking the father's anticipation as he listens for his deceased wife. Breathy /h/ alliteration ("he'd hear her") also helps convey the father's hushed vigilance; he imagines his wife will return and reveal that her death was only a bad dream.

LINES 13-16

I believe life ...
... I still call.

The final stanza marks a turn in the poem. (It's a Meredithian sonnet, and sonnets conventionally feature such twists.) The speaker declares: "I believe life ends with death, and that is all."

This is the first time the speaker has explicitly shared his own thoughts and feelings about his mother's death. He implies that, unlike his father, he's accepted that she's gone for good. He also suggests his frustration with his father's denial; to the speaker, it would seem, death is pretty straightforward. He mourned his mother's death but didn't delude himself about her absence. He's fully aware that she hasn't "just popped out to get the tea."

Yet in the last few lines of the poem, the speaker switches gears entirely. Suddenly, he shifts from writing about his dad in the past tense to *addressing* "both" his mom and dad, via apostrophe, in the present:

> You haven't both gone shopping; just the same,
> in my new black leather phone book there's your name
> and the disconnected number I still call.

The speaker implies that his father has also died, and that he's now grappling with the loss of both his parents. And while he's not in a full-blown state of denial, as his grieving father was, he suggests that he relates to his father's complicated grief more than he would have expected. He knows he can no longer ring up his father, yet he's copied his father's phone number into his "new" phone book, as though it were still a valid means of contact. He even dials the number sometimes, knowing full well it's "disconnected."

In other words, even when one isn't in complete denial, grief can still cause one to act irrationally. The speaker's behavior, like his father's, highlights not only his lingering shock but also the love he still feels for those he's lost.

POETIC DEVICES

ENJAMBMENT

The poem contains a few enjambed lines, which add a hint of momentum and emphasis here and there.

The whole first stanza consists of end-stopped lines (note that some of these lines aren't punctuated, but are still end-stopped by their syntax). As a result, the poem's pace feels slow and deliberate, appropriate to a mood of mourning.

The first enjambment arrives in the second stanza. Notice the change in pace between the two short sentences in line 5 and the longer sentence enjambed across lines 6-7:

> You couldn't just drop in. You had to phone.
> He'd put you off an hour to give him time
> to clear away her things and look alone
> as though his still raw love were such a crime.

The enjambment evokes the father's urgency as he hurries to "clear away" his deceased wife's things. This hurry suggests that he knows how his behavior looks to others. He's ashamed and doesn't want his son to know that he hasn't moved on. (Notice that the following line is end-stopped by syntax, but the poet omits punctuation after "alone," so that it seems to dangle sadly in the empty space at the end of the line.)

Enjambments can also make end-stopped lines sound more emphatic. The enjambment across lines 10-11 ("he'd hear her

key / scrape in the rusted lock") makes the following, end-stopped line ("end his grief") land with greater finality. It's an ironic finality, of course, because the father's grief will *not* end. This enjambment also creates a brief pause, evoking the father's hushed anticipation, and emphasizes the harsh, unsettling word "scrape," which falls just after the line break.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 6-7:** "time / to"
- **Lines 10-11:** "key / scrape"

CAESURA

"Long Distance II" contains only a few caesuras, but they add dramatic weight to the poem. In line 5, for instance, the speaker says about his lonely, grieving father:

> You couldn't drop in. You had to call.

The period creates a hard pause that makes this moment feel more prolonged. The speaker is essentially saying that after his mother's death, his father lost the ability to have family over spontaneously because he was too ashamed to have others know that he was living his life as if she were still there. Drawing out these statements with the use of caesura makes them feel more loaded; the speaker isn't explicitly passing judgement on his father, but he is indicating how irrational he thinks his behavior is.

In the final stanza, there are two caesuras in lines 13-14:

> I believe life ends with death, and that is all.
> You haven't both gone shopping; just the same,

Here, caesura emphasizes the disconnect between what the speaker "believe[s]"—that life concludes with death and there's nothing more to it—with his desire to see his parents again. That "just the same" contradicts the earlier "and that is all," suggesting that grief is more complicated than people's beliefs about the world. The caesura also creates a halting rhythm leading up to the conclusion of the poem, suggesting that the speaker is much more vulnerable than he'd previously let on.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "in. You"
- **Line 13:** "death, and"
- **Line 14:** "shopping; just"

ANAPHORA

The poem contains a couple of instances of anaphora, which adds emphasis and momentum to the language. The first example appears in line 5:

> You couldn't just drop in. You had to phone.

This is a general rather than a specific "you"; the speaker means that no one was allowed to show up at his father's house without advance notice. The repetition makes these statements more emphatic, highlighting how stubborn and compulsive the father's behavior is.

The speaker also repeats the pronoun "He" (or the contraction "He'd") in lines 6, 9, and 12, at the beginning of three successive sentences. Here are lines 9-12:

> He couldn't risk my blight of disbelief
> though sure that very soon he'd hear her key
> scrape in the rusted lock and end his grief.
> He knew she'd just popped out to get the tea.

Here, anaphora draws attention to the speaker's subject: his father. For the most part, the speaker stays focused on his father's experience of grief. Lines 6-12 help paint a layered psychological portrait of the man, with each "He"/"He'd" sentence adding a fresh layer. This focus makes it all the more surprising—and touching—when the speaker switches gears in the final stanza, revealing his own grief and denial.

Where Anaphora appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "You," "You"
- **Line 6:** "He'd"
- **Line 9:** "He"
- **Line 12:** "He"

ALLITERATION

Alliteration adds musicality and emphasis to the poem, while highlighting subtle relationships between the words it links. Notice the /m/ and /d/ alliteration in the first two lines, for example:

> Though my mother was already two years dead
> Dad kept her slippers warming by the gas,

"Dead" and "Dad" aren't just alliterative: they also share /d/ consonance and form a slant rhyme. This strong sonic relationship foreshadows what the speaker will reveal at the end of the poem: that his father has now died too.

In the following line, /b/ alliteration ("bottles"/"bed") highlights a detail that illustrates the father's consideration for his wife. She may be gone, but his love for her clearly remains. Later, in line 8, the alliteration between "still" (as in "still raw love") and "such" stresses that his love remains painfully fresh.

Line 10 contains some strong /h/ alliteration: the speaker says his father was "sure that very soon he'd hear her key." This string of quiet /h/ sounds evokes the father's hushed vigilance

in the wake of his wife's death. He can't really bring himself to accept that she's not coming back.

Finally, alliterative /n/ and /b/ sounds sprinkle the poem's final lines:

> in my new black leather phone book there's your name
> and the disconnected number I still call.

Though subtle, the alliteration makes the ending more memorable. It also highlights both the black color of the phone book (a symbolic reminder of death) and the *newness* of the book—which implies that the speaker has *recently* written an entry for his father, even though his father's gone.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "my mother," "dead"
- **Line 2:** "Dad"
- **Line 3:** "bottles," "bed"
- **Line 8:** "still," "such"
- **Line 10:** "he'd," "hear," "her"
- **Line 15:** "new," "black," "book," "name"
- **Line 16:** "number"

VOCABULARY

The gas (Line 2) - A gas stove or heater of some kind.

Transport pass (Line 4) - A ticket that allows passengers to take public transit a set number of times in a given time period.

Blight of disbelief (Line 9) - A *blight* is a plague or disease, so this metaphor means that the father feared being infected by his son's certainty that the mother was really dead.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Long Distance II" is a Meredithian sonnet, a form named after the Victorian poet George Meredith (who wrote an entire collection of 16-line sonnets). The poem is divided into four quatrains, or four-line stanzas, which rhyme ABAB and use the traditional iambic pentameter of the sonnet form. (In other words, the lines typically contain 10 syllables arranged in a da-DUM, da-DUM rhythm, though there are some variations in both rhythm and line length.) The poem's orderly progression belies the messiness of grief; the speaker apparently wants his father to accept his mother's death, but his father refuses to do so.

At the end of the poem, it becomes clear that the speaker's own grief is more stubborn than he would have anticipated. This shift in the speaker's outlook corresponds with the traditional "volta" of the sonnet, in which the poem shifts from problem to solution or from one perspective to another.

The poem's orderly form might also hint that there is nothing unusual about the father and son's struggle to let go of people they love. Once the speaker accepts denial as a normal part of the grief process, his emotional conflict with his father seems to fade, and he's able to simply miss the man.

METER

The poem's meter is loose, but it generally hovers around iambic pentameter. This traditional meter, which is standard in the sonnet form, uses 10-syllable lines that follow an unstressed-stressed beat pattern (da-DUM). Line 7, for instance, is written in perfect iambic pentameter:

> to clear | away | her things | and look | alone

The tidy meter corresponds with a moment in which the father is literally tidying up, pretending to have accepted his loss in order to appease others' expectations. (In reality, his "love" is "still raw" and he doesn't fully believe his wife is gone.)

Line 9 is also written in iambic pentameter:

> He could- | n't risk | my blight | of dis- | belief

And line 12 is pretty close as well:

> He knew | she'd just | popped out | to get | the tea.

Some lines have a rougher rhythm, however, and the line length varies as well. This looseness contributes to the poem's candid, conversational tone; the speaker is describing loss and grief and love, but he's not romanticizing them or smoothing out their rougher edges.

RHYME SCHEME

For the most part, the poem follows a simple ABAB rhyme scheme. This gives the poem a predictable structure and musicality despite its fairly loose meter. What's more, the poem uses *full* rhymes—"phone" and "alone," "key" and "tea," etc. So the musicality isn't subtle; the last word of every line is pretty heavily emphasized. The combination of strict rhyme scheme, rough meter, and conversational tone gives the poem an interesting formal tension, which seems to draw out underlying emotional tensions.

There's also a surprise in the final stanza, as the poem suddenly switches to an ABBA rhyme scheme. This switch subtly emphasizes the relationship between the phrases "that is all" and "I still call," reinforcing the idea that love doesn't end with death. The shift in rhyme scheme also mirrors a change in the speaker's understanding of grief and denial. Earlier, he couldn't

understand why his father failed to accept his mother's death. But now that his father has also died, the speaker finds himself relating to his father's behavior a little more.

SPEAKER

The speaker of "Long Distance II" can be understood as Harrison himself, who was writing in response to the loss of both his parents. At the start of the poem, he recalls how his father dealt with grief after his wife (Harrison's mother) died. The speaker couldn't quite understand his father's behavior; the older man went to great lengths to deny the reality of his wife's death. He even feared that his son's "disbelief" that she was somehow still alive would infect him as well. He didn't *want* to accept that she was gone.

But at the end of the poem, the speaker reveals that his father has died as well, and that he now finds himself dealing with the loss in a fairly similar way. He isn't convinced his father is still alive, the way his father was convinced about his mother, but he does still call his father's number, knowing full well it's been "disconnected." In other words, his loss has taught him how grief can make people act irrationally, even when they think they know better.

SETTING

The poem isn't set in a specific time or place, although there are definitely markers of modernity: the "transport pass" and "phone" both locate the poem in a contemporary setting.

Otherwise, the poem's details mostly emphasize the father's love for his deceased wife. His "warming" of her "slippers," slipping "hot water bottles" under the covers on "her side of the bed," and "renew[ing] her transport pass" all clearly indicate that he enjoyed taking care of her. He can't let go of the ways in which he expressed his love for her.

In fact, according to the speaker, his father was convinced that any minute he'd hear "her key / scrape in the rusted lock." This imagery suggests his vigilance—he can almost hear her, even though she isn't there—as well as the way he's let things go since she died. (The rustiness of the lock suggests he's no longer taking care of the home he used to share with her.)

Finally, the speaker reveals that he transferred his father's phone number to his "[new] phone book," even though his father's number is "disconnected." (Physical phone/address books, used to keep track of people's contact information, were more common before the digital age.) This detail suggests that some time has passed since his father died, and like his father, he's struggling to let go of someone he loved.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Tony Harrison (1937-present) is a prominent English poet and playwright whose work is widely read and performed around the world. Harrison grew up in the city of Leeds, in the north of England. A working-class kid, he won a school scholarship and went on to study Classics at university. The early influence of classical literature—particularly the idea of the poet as a kind of public servant—runs throughout his work.

As Harrison's career progressed, his relationship to his own formal education, and the distance it put between himself and his intended audience, began to shape his writing. At some point, he realized his own parents wouldn't be able to understand his poems. Though they were no longer alive, he began to tailor his work to a working-class audience, using the kind of direct language found in "Long Distance II." This shift caused some critics to call his later work overly simplistic, but fellow poets such as Seamus Heaney, Simon Armitage, and Douglas Dunn continued to laud his achievements.

"Long Distance II" also belongs to the sonnet tradition. Sonnets are the most recognizable form in English-language poetry, though this particular poem uses a lesser-known variation on the form called the Meredithian sonnet. The Meredithian sonnet is named after George Meredith, a 19th-century Victorian poet who penned *Modern Love*, a book of 16-line sonnets.

"Long Distance II" was published in *Continuous: 50 Sonnets from the School of Eloquence and Other Poems*, Harrison's third collection, which, like Meredith's *Modern Love*, consists of 50 poems. As the title implies, this 1981 book is an expansion of Harrison's 1978 collection, *From the School of Eloquence and Other Poems*. This particular poem is a continuation of an earlier poem, "Long Distance I," whose speaker similarly describes his father's grief after the death of his wife.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Harrison published "Long Distance II" in the UK in 1981. The poem's straightforward sensibilities reflect Harrison's working-class upbringing and his desire to overcome class barriers by writing accessible poetry. His approach may reflect the political climate he was writing in; by 1981, Britain had experienced two years of prime minister Margaret Thatcher's extremely conservative leadership, and class conflict was at the forefront of public consciousness.

However, "Long Distance II" refers to personal rather than historical events. Harrison had a strained relationship with his father, whom he described as a "curmudgeonly, hostile presence" in his early work. After both his parents had died, however, he found himself writing about—and *to*—them, discovering a closer bond with them in the process.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Read Harrison's "Long Distance I" — "Long Distance II" is a continuation of this earlier poem Harrison wrote about his father after his mother died. (https://www.google.com/books/edition/Collected_Poems/io3_CgAAQBAJ?hl=en&gbpv=1&dq=tony+harrison+your+bed%27s+got+two+wrong+sides&pg=PT153&printsec=frontcover)
- Tony Harrison, "Man of Mysteries" — Read about Harrison's working-class background and devotion to a more "approachable" kind of writing. (https://www.theguardian.com/books/2000/apr/01/poetry.theatre)
- A Reading of the Poem — The poem as read by Daniel J. P. Loughnane. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T0lpeGLD9iE)
- Learn About the Poet's Life — A Poetry Foundation biography of Harrison. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/tony-harrison)
- Harrison on Family and Education — A book review discussing Harrison's complicated relationship to his own education and how, in some ways, it alienated him from his parents. (https://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/mar/12/tony-harrison-selected-poems-review)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER TONY HARRISON POEMS

- The Bright Lights of Sarajevo

HOW TO CITE

MLA

Mottram, Darla. "*Long Distance II*." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 15 Dec 2022. Web. 3 Jan 2023.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Mottram, Darla. "*Long Distance II*." LitCharts LLC, December 15, 2022. Retrieved January 3, 2023. https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/tony-harrison/long-distance-ii.