

You Will Know When You Get There



SUMMARY

Speaking directly to the reader, the speaker says that you never see anyone come up from the sea this late in the evening or this late in the year, nor do you see anyone else walking down the final, steep half-mile of shore toward the sea.

The ground feels as slick and slippery as wet metal in the spots where it recently rained, the rain shower seeming to have torn the sunlight into pieces.

The speaker compares the flowing sunlight to water being poured from a tank in the sky—this light falls over mountaintops, trees, and shifting clouds.

In a way that seems both natural and somewhat heavenly, the light pours from the sky as if rushing out of a previously damned-up reservoir—while there's still light in this reservoir, it continues to cascade out of the sky and over the sea.

The light seems to amass great amounts of gold against the sea's dark water. The light also bounces off tiny pieces of crushed rock.

Directly addressing the reader again, the speaker says that these bits of light glow under your feet after having been slicked by the rain. You go down to the sea just as the sun sinks toward the ocean.

The setting sun reaches to the ocean before you do, the speaker says. Two boys next to a campfire turn their faces toward you as you walk, but they're reluctant to say anything to you.

The boys' hesitation stems from the fact that the whole living world seems to roll away from you as you walk toward the sea; you are a lone man on the beach, a man carrying a bag to collect mussels from the shore.

You have an appointment with the low tide, when the ocean has receded roughly twelve feet.

There's just one hour left of light in the day, and the swelling moon soaks up the last of it. A heavy wave slams like a door over you.

The bottom of the sea shakes with the weight of the wave. You go beneath the sea all by yourself at this late hour of the day, disappearing into the rushing darkness of a crack in the ocean floor.



THEMES



EMBRACING DEATH

"You Will Know When You Get There" is about the mystery of death. In the poem, a man makes a solitary descent into the sea late in the day, walking over dangerous, slippery rocks to reach a dark "fissure" (or deep crevice) in the water. This "fissure" represents death itself—something the poem suggests everyone must inevitably face on their own, and which people won't fully understand until they "get there."

The speaker starts by describing a man "going down to the sea." There's no one else around, and the "last kilometre" to the beach is dangerously slippery. Daylight is fading, and falling rain seems to cut up the light that remains. Daylight traditionally represents life (whereas darkness and night represent death), and all this [imagery](#) implies that the man's lonely journey is really a [metaphorical](#) one towards the end of his life. That the way "steep" might suggest how quickly the end of life seems to appear, the struggles that accompany old age, and how easy it becomes to topple forward into its darkness.

The speaker says that "nobody else goes down" to the sea at such a time, reinforcing the idea that the man must make this journey—to the sea and to his death—by himself. Adding to this sense of isolation is the fact that two boys by a campfire see the man descending, they feel "hesitant" to speak to him. This, the speaker says, is simply the "hesitancy of the earth rolling [...] away"—a statement that implies smoothly growing distance between the man and the living world. As the man approaches death, the earth itself seems to move away from him. The boys, with the brightly lit faces, are not ready to reach out to death and its darkness; while death is something that all people will face, the image implies, they will do so in their own time.

The man himself, however, is ready. He doesn't seem reluctant to make this journey, and even seems to embrace the coming end of life. He has an "arrangement with the tide," the speaker says, with the tide here representing death itself. Essentially, the man has accepted and surrendered to his fate; his time has come, and he seems to be at peace with that. The idea that he has an "arrangement with the tide" also suggests that, in a way, the time of the man's death has been preordained or is in keeping with the natural laws of existence.

The poem ends as a heavy wave crashes over the man like a slamming door, and he goes down "alone" into the "surge-black fissure" of death. The man has left the world of light and life behind, irreversibly entering another realm that remains closed to those still on this (that is, the living) side of it.

This may seem frightening, but the poem treats death as more

than a grim inevitability. It implies that death is a natural part of life, as predictable as the tides, and that death can even be beautiful—because, in dying, people embrace a mysterious world that reveals itself only "when you get there."

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-22



LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-3

*Nobody comes up ...
... last steep kilometre,*

The title of the poem addresses the reader directly and introduces a sense of mystery. "You Will Know When You Get There," the title says without specifying what, exactly, "you" will know or where the "there" is. The poem will go on to explore this sense of "getting there," as it describes (using the second-person pronoun "you") a person's steep descent toward the ocean. As the poem progresses, it will become clear that the "there" in the title refers to both the sea and to death.

In the first two lines ("Nobody comes [...] goes down"), the poem begins to subtly set up an [extended metaphor](#) between the sea and the end of life. "Nobody comes up from the sea as late as this," the speaker says in the first line. This lets readers know that, in the world of the poem, the sea is a place that people must climb out of after entering it—but nobody ever returns from the sea after entering it this late in the day or even this late in the year. This idea hints at the same sense of finality usually associated with death.

Although the first lines begin to establish the poem's central metaphor, they can also be read literally:

- Readers can imagine a landscape near the sea. This landscape is getting darker, and winter is approaching.
- Although people often make the steep descent to the ocean in daylight and in the summer months, the speaker suggests that this trek now seems dangerous and ominous: "nobody else goes down / the last steep kilometre" to the beach.

The [repetition](#) (technically [diacope](#)) of the word "nobody" in the first two lines ("Nobody comes up" and "nobody else goes down") emphasizes that this scene is deserted. At the same time, the word "else" in "nobody else" indicates that there is someone making this descent, despite the fact that it's so treacherous.

The speaker has already noted that nobody ever comes back "up" from this trek at this time of day or year, meaning that

going down to the sea at this time is like approaching one's own death—a point of no return. The sea therefore represents death, and the journey toward it becomes an extended metaphor for what it's like to near the end of one's own life.

Several elements of sound and pacing contribute to the meaning of these opening lines:

- First, the repetition and variation in "nobody comes up" and "nobody else goes down" emphasizes the [juxtaposition](#) between "up" and "down," with "up" representing life and "down" representing the steady lead up to the end of life.
- The sharp [enjambments](#) at the ends of lines 1 through 3 ("Nobody comes [...] wet-metalled where") also create a sense of falling that aligns with the image of someone walking down a steep incline toward the sea.
- Finally, the [sibilant](#) /s/ sounds and [assonant](#) long /e/ sounds in "sea," "season," and "steep" add musicality to the language while also emphasizing some of the poem's most important images and ideas—namely, the image of the sea, the fact that it's winter, and the beach's sharp slope.

LINES 3-6

*wet-metalled where ...
... thickening and thinning.*

The speaker describes the treacherous descent toward the sea, bringing to life the last "steep kilometre" (or half mile) that leads to the water. This final part of the descent, the speaker says, is "wet-metalled," [metaphorically](#) suggesting that the rocky path toward the sea is as slippery as metal that has been slicked by water. The lead-up to the sea, then, is risky and dangerous, reflecting the frightening feeling of moving toward death (since the sea represents death in the world of the poem).

To make this scene come alive even more, the speaker uses visual [imagery](#) to describe the interplay between rain and sunlight. The last light of the day is still visible through the rain, which seems to "shred[]" it apart.

- By presenting the rain as if it's a knife slowly destroying the light, the speaker subtly suggests that the light itself is vulnerable—an important idea, since light often [symbolizes](#) life, while darkness often represents death. That mere raindrops are capable of "shredding the light" implies that life is delicate and won't last forever.

The speaker builds on this idea in line 5 by saying that the light "pour[s] out of its tank in the sky." Because tanks have a limited amount of space, it becomes clear that there's a finite amount of light.

The fact that this light is "pouring out" and bathing everything in sight therefore means it won't last much longer; soon enough, the light will run out and the beach will plunge into darkness. This, it seems, will most likely coincide with the person's entry into the sea, suggesting that this person doesn't have much time left amongst the living.

LINES 6-10

*Too ...
... it!*

The speaker continues to describe the way the sky—referred to here as "the damned / reservoir"—pours light onto the earth below. The language in this section is difficult to parse, but the speaker seems to suggest that the dying sunlight ("half celestial") looks surprisingly capable ("too credibly") of illuminating the world even though this light is *actually* fading to darkness. In other words, the person on the beach looks out over the horizon and sees the sky's "reservoir" of light "emptying" itself "over the sea," and this makes it seem like it will stay bright out for a long time. And yet, the speaker has already implied that the sun will soon set.

Because the poem uses light and dark as [symbols](#) of life and death, this lavish description of a sunset speaks to the way people view the end of their own lives. In the same way that sunlight can seem too bright and strong to ever plunge into darkness, people tend to have trouble coming to terms with their own mortality. The focus on this incredible sunset therefore speaks to how hard it can be for people to accept death as an imminent reality—even when they are, as the person in this poem is, marching directly toward it.

The line "it gathers the gold against it" is an [allusion](#) to Ezra Pound's [Cantos](#):

- The original line reads: "In the gloom, the gold gathers the light against it."
- Pound's *Cantos* are incredibly complex and too multi-layered to dive into here. Suffice it to say, though, that Canto XVII—in which this phrase originally appeared—has elements of an epic journey, which perhaps aligns with the fact that the person in "You Will Know When You Get There" is about to journey into the darkness of the vast sea (and will, in doing so, cross over into death).
- On a more basic level, it's likely that the speaker (and, in turn, Curnow himself) simply likes the [imagery](#) of "gold" light "gather[ing]" against the darkness.

LINES 10-13

*The light is ...
... gets there first.*

The speaker continues to describe the descent into the sea,

now depicting the rocks underfoot. Illuminated by the setting sun, these rocks shine from the rain. But the speaker doesn't just say that the rocks shine—rather, the speaker suggests that the rocks *are* "the light."

- This [metaphorically](#) suggests that the entire scene is both earthly and otherworldly ("half celestial"), since the person making the descent walks on rocks *and* on light itself. This makes the entire setting feel extra meaningful, imbuing the scene with the same kind of strange, heightened feelings that undoubtedly arise when one nears the end of life.

As the speaker details the journey toward the sea, readers will perhaps feel swept up in the intensity of the descent. This intensity becomes even more apparent when the speaker says, "and down you go and so in its way does / the sun which gets there first." In this moment, readers *become* the person walking toward the sea. Suddenly, readers are swept up in the momentum the poem has built—so swept up that they find themselves rushing toward the water as the sun sinks rapidly on the horizon.

The suddenness of this development conveys the sense that death is unavoidable and can happen almost before one is aware of its approach; until this very moment, readers have simply looked on as somebody else nears a metaphorical death. Now, though, readers find themselves in this person's shoes, a development that reflects the tendency people have to ignore the reality of death until it forces itself upon them.

There is a very musical [internal rhyme](#) when the speaker says "and down you **go** and **so** in its way does / the sun [...]." This rhyme emphasizes the idea that the person in this poem—and, thus, readers themselves—descends into the ocean at the same time as the sun. This internal rhyme thus helps the speaker imply that, in dying, a person simply partakes in the movements of nature: just as the sun sets every day, so too must everyone reach the "setting"—or end—of their lives.

LINES 13-15

*Boys, two of ...
... back and away*

The speaker notes the presence of two boys on the beach. The boys watch the person approach the sea, their faces lit by a campfire as they turn to look up at this person. Given that—at least in the world of this poem—darkness [symbolizes](#) death and light symbolizes life, it's significant that the boys' faces shine with firelight, indicating that they're vibrantly alive.

The person walking toward the water, on the other hand, will soon plunge into complete darkness. This calls attention to the [juxtaposition](#) between the boys and the person on the beach: whereas the boys are young and full of life, the person passing them will soon die.

Building on this sense of juxtaposition, the speaker says that the boys' hesitancy to speak or intervene is "a hesitancy of the earth rolling back and away." This [metaphorically](#) suggests that the entire living world has gotten away from the person approaching the sea, as if it's a ball that has started to "roll[]" away. The distance between this person and life itself is, in other words, getting greater and greater as the person nears the sea. The boys notice this separation because they still very much belong to the living world.

These lines are fairly [consonant](#), as the speaker repeats the /f/ sound alongside the /r/ and [sibilant](#) /s/ sounds. Consider, for example, line 14:

turn campfirelit faces, a hesitancy to speak

The /f/ and /s/ sounds are quite soft, and the /r/ sound in words like "turn" and "campfire" pairs nicely with these gentle forms of consonance. These calming sounds also offset the speaker's use of harsher consonance, like the /p/ and /k/ sounds in the words "campfirelit" and "speak."

The speaker thus uses different kinds of consonance to blend a satisfying, lulling quality with a more abrasive, cutting overall sound—a combination that perhaps reflects the fact that death is natural but still intimidating and difficult to embrace.

LINES 16-18

*behind this man ...
... point seven meters,*

The speaker goes on to describe the man making the descent. Until now, the speaker has only referred to this person as "you" or—as is the case for the majority of the poem's first half—avoided any kind of specificity whatsoever when it comes to describing the person at the center of the poem. Instead, the speaker has focused on the [imagery](#) of the rain, sunlight, and falling darkness that characterizes the "last steep kilometre" of the shore.

Here, though, the speaker calls the person a "man." Suddenly, then, the poem becomes a bit more specific, as readers learn a little more about the person on the beach. This is a very fluid transition, so it doesn't necessarily change all that much about the poem itself. However, this slight change creates a shift, as the character on the beach becomes a bit more real and tangible.

Having made this shift, the speaker says that the man has "a bag / to pick mussels, having an arrangement with the tide." The fact that the man is going to collect mussels (which one finds on the shore during low tide) suggests that he's in tune with the movements of nature and the ocean: he knows when it's low tide and even knows that the ocean will be "shallowed three point seven meters" (approximately twelve feet).

- These details indicate that the man must

understand that he's approaching his own death—after all, if he's so in tune with the rhythms of the sea, he surely knows it's treacherous to make such a descent at this time of day and at this time of year.

The word "arrangement" also reinforces this sense. The man, it seems, has a kind of appointment with the ocean—and by extension, with his own death. The poem implies, then, that the man approaches the end of his own life with awareness and in keeping with the larger movements and rhythms of the natural world. There might even be a right time to die, the poem suggests, and the man is simply keeping his "arrangement" with the universe as a whole.

The speaker's use of [enjambment](#) between lines 16 and 17 contributes to the sense that the man is making his way toward death:

behind this man going down to the sea with a bag
to pick mussels, having an arrangement with the tide,

This enjambment creates a feeling of momentum between the two stanzas. At the same time, though, the [caesura](#) after the phrase "to pick mussels" lends a slight sense of control to the section, ensuring that the words don't barrel forward *too* fast. This reflects the man's consistent, plodding pace—he doesn't hesitate to meet his death, but he also doesn't rush toward it. Instead, he assuredly walks toward the sea, moving with the same kind of steady, gradual grace as the sun as it sinks on the horizon.

LINES 19-22

*one hour's light ...
... the surge-black fissure.*

The speaker describes how the last light lingers in the sky as the man makes the final descent to the sea. There is still, the speaker says, "one hour's light to be left," suggesting that even as the man approaches his death, he can treasure his remaining time. This recalls the earlier image of gold "gather[ed]" against the sea, suggesting that the end of life—or, in the poem's [extended metaphor](#), the end of the day—has its own beauty, its own particular "light."

And yet, there is the very clear sense that the light is quickly fading. Although there's still an hour left of daylight to enjoy, darkness is creeping into the scene, as made clear by the suggestion that the moon is "excrecent"—a word often used to describe a swelling or an unwanted protuberance. The moon therefore pushes its way into the scene, making it quite clear that there isn't much time before day turns to night.

In keeping with the feeling that night (or, rather, death) is closer than it might seem, the man's entry into the sea happens quite suddenly. A wave slams over him and carries him into the

depths of the water. The speaker describes this wave [metaphorically](#) as a “door,” suggesting that the man has now, by dying, passed through a portal and into another realm (from which he will never return). When this happens, the “sea-floor shudders” with the weight of the “heavy wave,” emphasizing the finality of the man’s passage through the metaphorical “door” between life and death.

In the last line, the speaker switches back to the second-person pronoun, “you,” saying:

Down **you** go alone, so late, into the surge-black fissure.

Once again, the identity of the person at the center of the poem shifts. It’s possible that the speaker uses “you” in this final line so that readers feel as if they, too, have been swept up by the sea. The readers are, after all, human beings, meaning that they will inevitably meet the same end as the man on the beach. By using “you” in this moment, then, the speaker encourages readers to imagine what it must be like to surrender to the forces of nature and, in doing so, accept death as an inevitability.

The [consonance](#) of /sh/ and /ur/ sounds in “fissure” echo the sounds in “shudders,” which appears in line 21 (“slams, a heavy [...] sea-floor shudders”). This reflects both the softness and strength of the ocean, as the hushed /sh/ sounds hiss like waves crashing against the beach.

Meanwhile, the /d/ sound in “door” in line 21 [alliterates](#) in “down” in the final line, showing that the man has gone “down” through this door, and can’t come back up. This aligns with what the speaker said in the poem’s first line: “Nobody comes up from the sea as late as this.”

Although the [imagery](#) of the wave crashing over the person on the beach is stark and powerful, it is also somewhat beautiful, especially since it plays out against the backdrop of the rest of the poem’s naturalistic imagery. In other words, this wave is at the center of a striking scene: a beach bathed in both rain and sunlight, with the moon edging into the sky. This beauty suggests that death—both for this man and for the reader—isn’t necessarily something to be feared. By accepting death, the poem implies, a person becomes one with the natural cycles of the world, thus embracing something profound and vast.

the inevitability of death: in the same way that the sun must set, life must end.

The speaker emphasizes the beauty of the light in these moments, saying that it looks “gold” over the ocean. This suggests that the end of life has its own beauty and can be appreciated in its own right, even though it signals the approach of death.

To that end, the coming darkness symbolizes death, as the speaker describes a “surge-black fissure” that eventually swallows the person walking into the sea. This, then, casts death as an all-consuming force, something to which everyone will, in the end, have to surrender.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- Lines 4-6
- Lines 6-11
- Lines 12-13
- Lines 13-14
- Lines 19-20
- Line 22



POETIC DEVICES

ALLUSION

The poem [alludes](#) to [Ezra Pound’s Cantos](#). The phrase, “it gathers the gold against / it,” refers to Canto XVII, which includes the line: “In the gloom, the gold / gathers the light against it.”

This allusion deepens the [imagery](#) of the poem, creating a picture of the setting sun over the ocean, the last rays of sunlight look “golden” against the growing darkness and the ocean waves. This image suggests that the end of day (and the end of life) has its own beauty, since the light becomes almost golden at such a time and stands out against the “gloom” of night’s (and death’s) approach.

The allusion can also be read as connecting the imagery of the poem to archetypal imagery and classical art. In [Canto XXI](#), Pound connects the image of this “gold” in the “gloom” to the [Mausoleum of Galla Placidia](#), a Roman building from Late Antiquity. Pound writes, “Gold fades in the gloom, / Under the blue-black roof, Placidia’s.” The ceiling of this mausoleum is covered in a deep blue mosaic, and late in the day, windows in the mausoleum capture the setting sun, which appears gold against the “gloom” of the ceiling and the building’s interior.

By referencing this line from the *Cantos*, then, the poem *also* alludes to what *Pound* alludes to: an ancient work of art and a mausoleum (or tomb) that, though it was made to hold the dead, still allows in the “gold” light of the setting sun. This infuses the poem’s meditation on death with a sense of beauty.



SYMBOLS



LIGHT AND DARK

The light in the poem [symbolizes](#) life. As the person on the beach moves toward the sea, evening progresses and the sunlight fades. This gradual fade represents

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Lines 9-10:** “it gathers the gold against / it.”

EXTENDED METAPHOR

The poem uses the man's descent toward the sea as an [extended metaphor](#) for the end of life. The gradual nature of this person's progression toward the water extends the metaphor throughout the entire poem, charting the progression of the person's last moments of life in a way that sheds light on what it's like to confront death.

At the end of the poem, it becomes particularly clear that entering the water represents the act of dying. In lines 20 through 22, the speaker says the following:

[...] A door
slams, a heavy wave, a door, the sea-floor shudders.
Down you go alone, so late, into the surge-black
fissure.

The way the speaker alternates between saying "a door" and "a heavy wave" calls attention to the fact that the water itself is metaphorical here. The way the water "slams" over the man on the beach hints at a sense of finality, as if it's a door leading to the afterlife. Since this door-like wave "slams" over the man, it's clear that he won't return from it. This connects with the cultural idea of death as a threshold that must be crossed—a threshold that leads to the world of the dead and, in some ways, the larger universe.

The extended metaphor of the person walking down the beach toward the sea also conveys the unique beauty one might experience at the end of life. The poem suggests that this person encounters a landscape that is “half celestial,” or half heavenly. The person thus moves through a world that is both ordinary and divine, as if occupying a space between life and death.

There's a certain loveliness to this, since the speaker describes the surrounding scene in vivid and striking detail. Noting the glory of the setting sun and the beautiful way that rain shimmers through the light, the poem implies that the transition between life and death is, in a certain sense, sacred and precious, just like the "gold" light of the setting sun.

Where Extended Metaphor appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-22

METAPHOR

In addition to its [extended metaphor](#), the poem also uses several smaller, more specific [metaphors](#). For example, the speaker describes the rain shower as “shredding the light.” This

image metaphorically compares the rain to knives or scissors that tear the light into small pieces, suggesting that the remaining daylight—and the life it represents—is fragile and delicate.

The speaker also describes the light as “pouring out of its tank in the sky.” Here, the speaker metaphorically compares the light to a kind of liquid that is stored in a “tank” (perhaps a reference to the sun). This creates the sense that there's a limited amount of light remaining in the sky; once the “tank” is empty, the light will be gone and night—along with death—will approach.

Similarly, the speaker describes the sky as a “dammed / reservoir up there that keeps emptying.” A reservoir is a human-made lake made to hold water, while a dam is used to keep this water in place. In the poem, though, the speaker suggests that the “dam” has been moved aside so that the water—in the form of rain—“empties” over the earth.

Like the metaphor of light “pouring” from a “tank,” this metaphor creates the sense that there's a limited amount of light in the world and that this light will soon be gone. This sense of limitation heightens the poem's dramatic tension, calling attention to the passage of time as the man approaches the end of his life.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** “a shower passed shredding the light”
- **Line 5:** “pouring out of its tank in the sky”
- **Lines 7-8:** “the dammed / reservoir up there keeps emptying”
- **Line 20:** “A door”
- **Line 21:** “a heavy wave, a door,”

IMAGERY

The poem is full of vivid [imagery](#) that conveys the unique beauty of both this landscape and the end of life. At the beginning of the poem, imagery communicates just how treacherous the descent to the ocean is: the “last steep kilometre” is “wet-metalled,” the speaker says, describing the slippery stones on the beach and, in doing so, illustrating how difficult it would be to carefully make one's way toward the sea.

The speaker also describes the way rain falls through sunlight, saying that the droplets “shred the light.” The light, for its part, “pour[s]” out of the sky, falling through “summits,” “trees,” and shifting clouds. These descriptions simply bring the world of the poem to life, inviting readers to imagine the breathtaking beauty created by simultaneous rain and sunlight.

In some ways, this imagery leads to an almost otherworldly feeling, as if the poem takes place somewhere that is both ordinary *and* somewhat divine. This is also the case when the speaker calls the light “bits of crushed rock randomly / glinting underfoot.” This complex image [metaphorically](#) suggests that the light is the rocks underfoot that reflect the light and seem

to glint or glow with this reflection. The speaker suggests that this image is “half celestial,” implying that the person on the beach is, in a sense, walking on the light while making this descent toward the sea.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- Line 3
- Line 4
- Lines 5-6
- Lines 7-8
- Lines 8-10
- Lines 10-12
- Lines 13-14
- Line 15
- Lines 16-17
- Line 18
- Lines 19-20
- Line 21
- Line 22

REPETITION

The poem features several moments of [repetition](#). The speaker specifically uses [diacope](#) to emphasize certain words and phrases. For example, in the opening stanza (“Nobody comes up [...] goes down”), the word “nobody” repeats as the speaker describes the dangerous descent to the beach at this time of day and this late in the year:

Nobody comes up from the sea as late as this
in the day and the season, and nobody else goes
down

The repetition here calls attention to the fact that no one “comes up from the sea” at such a time, hinting that the poem’s landscape is almost completely deserted. However, the second “nobody” appears in a slightly different form, as the speaker says: “nobody else goes down.” The inclusion of the word “else” lets readers know that, though the scene is mostly deserted, there is somebody making the descent.

Later in the poem, the speaker says that the “hesitancy” of the young boys by the campfire is “a hesitancy of the earth rolling back and away.” This repetition of “hesitancy” suggests that both the young boy and the earth itself are reluctant to intervene as the man approaches his own death, perhaps because it is the “right time” for him to die; he’s simply following the natural patterns of the universe. This repetition also connects the boys in their youth with the living world, which the man will soon fully leave behind.

Finally, the speaker repeats the word “door” in lines 20 and 21, describing the wave that crashes over the man and envelops him in the sea:

[...] A door
slams, a heavy wave, a door, the sea-floor shudders.

This repetition emphasizes that, in dying, the man has in fact crossed through a door of sorts: a threshold into another realm, from which there is no returning.

Another important instance of repetition appears when the speaker uses the phrase “down you go,” which first appears in stanza 6 (“glinting underfoot [...] way does”) and reappears in the poem’s last line (“Down you go [...] surge-black fissure”). This repeated phrase reminds readers that although the poem describes the descent of one person, everyone will eventually reach such a moment at the end of their own lives.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “Nobody”
- **Line 2:** “nobody”
- **Line 4:** “the light”
- **Line 8:** “the light”
- **Line 10:** “The light”
- **Line 12:** “down you go”
- **Line 14:** “hesitancy”
- **Line 15:** “hesitancy”
- **Line 16:** “going down”
- **Line 20:** “door”
- **Line 21:** “door”
- **Line 22:** “Down you go”

ENJAMBMENT

The poem makes use of [enjambment](#) throughout, propelling readers through the lines. This enjambment enacts what the poem describes: as the person on the beach makes the steep descent toward the water, the reader *also* makes the descent, moving with the forward momentum of the poem itself.

Consider, for instance, the enjambment in lines 6 through 10, as the speaker describes the way the light falls out of the sky:

[...] Too

credibly by half celestial, the dammed
reservoir up there keeps emptying while the light
lasts
over the sea where 'it gathers the gold against
it'.

These instances of enjambment are especially prominent, allowing the speaker to stretch a single sentence over five lines. This enjambment also creates a sense of fluidity in the poem, ushering readers from line to line in a way that aligns with the image of sunlight pouring out of a “reservoir” in the sky—in the same way that the light gushes onto the earth, readers

experience a kind of falling motion as they make their way through the poem.

Since so many of the poem's lines are enjambed, the [end-stopped lines](#) in the poem's final [couplet](#) ("slams, a heavy [...] surge-black fissure") stand out. Line 21, for example, is the first place where the end of a line coincides with the end of a sentence, bringing the poem to a full stop. In fact, both of the poem's last two lines do this:

slams, a heavy wave, a door, the sea-floor **shudders**.
Down you go alone, so late, into the surge-black
fissure.

These end-stopped lines convey death's finality, as the waves envelop the person on the beach once and for all.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "this / in"
- **Lines 2-3:** "down / the"
- **Lines 3-4:** "where / a"
- **Lines 4-5:** "keeps / pouring"
- **Lines 6-7:** "Too / credibly"
- **Lines 7-8:** "dammed / reservoir"
- **Lines 8-9:** "lasts / over"
- **Lines 9-10:** "against / it"
- **Lines 10-11:** "randomly / glinting"
- **Lines 11-12:** "short / shower"
- **Lines 12-13:** "does / the"
- **Lines 14-15:** "speak / is"
- **Lines 15-16:** "away / behind"
- **Lines 16-17:** "bag / to"
- **Lines 19-20:** "excrecent / moon"
- **Lines 20-21:** "door / slams"

CAESURA

While the poem uses [enjambment](#) to propel readers forward, it also creates moments of pause with mid-line [caesurae](#). For instance, although the opening line flows freely and runs into the second line, there is a noticeable pause in the second line:

Nobody comes up from the sea as late as this
in the day and the season, || and nobody else goes
down

This caesura separates the two clauses and, in doing so, spotlights the slight variation at play here—namely, that "nobody else goes down" to the sea at this time of day or year, suggesting that there is somebody who does this. By inserting this pause, the speaker slows readers down, making it more likely that they'll notice this distinction.

The moments of caesurae in the poem become even more noticeable when a sentence ends mid-line, bringing the poem

to a complete stop before it begins again. This happens in line 6:

trees, vapours thickening and thinning. || Too

This encourages readers to dwell on the image of the evening light pouring through misty ocean clouds. It also disrupts the flow, controlling the speaker's pace (which is otherwise quite fast and unpredictable). The instances of caesurae, then, allow readers to pause—but only temporarily—before once more following the person's descent toward the water and, in turn, the poem's rapid momentum toward its conclusion.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "season, and"
- **Line 3:** "kilometre, wet"
- **Line 5:** "sky, through"
- **Line 6:** "trees, vapours," "thinning. Too"
- **Line 7:** "celestial, the"
- **Line 10:** "it! The"
- **Line 11:** "underfoot, wetted"
- **Line 12:** "shower, and"
- **Line 13:** "first. Boys," "two"
- **Line 14:** "faces, a"
- **Line 17:** "mussels, having"
- **Line 19:** "left, and"
- **Line 20:** "it. A"
- **Line 21:** "slams, a," "wave, a," "door, the"
- **Line 22:** "alone, so," "late, into"

ALLITERATION

The poem is full of [alliteration](#), which creates a musical effect while emphasizing certain words. Above all, the alliterative instances of /l/ sounds are especially notable. For instance, in stanza 4 ("credibly by [...] light lasts"), alliterative /l/ sounds connect "light" and "lasts." These soft, lateral sounds call attention to the glowing quality of the evening light as it fades. Similarly, alliterative /l/ sounds appear in lines 19 and 20:

one hour's light to be left, and there's the excrecent
moon sponging off the last of it. A door

In this moment, the /l/ sound links the words "light," "left," and "last," spotlighting the image of sunlight fading in the sky as the moon "sponge[s] off the last of it."

Alliteration also appears in phrases like "thickening and thinning" in line 6 ("trees, vapours [...] Too"), "gathers the gold" in line 9 ("over the sea [...] gold against"), and "rock randomly" in line 10 ("it! The [...] rock randomly"). These alliterative patterns create dense clusters throughout the poem, lifting the language out of ordinary speech and into a kind of music.

Finally, in the last two lines of the poem ("slams, a [...] surge-

black fissure"), /d/ sounds alliterate in the words "door" and "down." These hard /d/ sounds communicate a sense of finality in the poem's ending. This helps the speaker imply that the man has finally passed through the "door" of his own death and into another realm, from which there is no returning.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "shower," "shredding"
- **Line 6:** "thickening," "thinning"
- **Line 8:** "light lasts"
- **Line 9:** "gathers," "gold"
- **Line 10:** "rock randomly"
- **Lines 11-12:** "short / shower"
- **Line 12:** "down," "does"
- **Line 19:** "light," "left"
- **Line 20:** "last"
- **Line 21:** "slams," "door," "sea"
- **Line 22:** "Down," "surge"

CONSONANCE

Much like [alliteration](#), [consonance](#) appears throughout the poem, creating certain patterns in the language and calling attention to important words. For example, the consonant /r/ sound is quite prominent in line 10:

[...] The light is bits of crushed rock randomly

The line also features consonance of the hard /c/ sound in the words "crushed" and "rock." Taken together, these sounds almost [onomatopoeically](#) convey the crunching, dense sound of walking over rock or gravel.

In other moments, the poem's consonance is a bit more subtle, as the speaker infuses short, passing phrases with consonant sounds. Take, for example, the /v/ sound in the phrase "a heavy wave" in line 21 ("slams, a [...] sea-floor shudders"). The /v/ gives this moment an extra bump of musicality while also adding a pleasing overall quality to the speaker's language, making it feel densely layered. This adds a richness to the poem, heightening the intensity of the language while also simply making the words sound satisfying.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "sea," "this"
- **Line 2:** "season," "else"
- **Line 3:** "last," "steep," "kilometre," "metalled"
- **Line 4:** "shower," "shredding," "keeps"
- **Line 5:** "pouring," "tank," "sky"
- **Line 6:** "thickening," "thinning"
- **Line 8:** "reservoir," "there," "keeps," "emptying," "while," "light," "lasts"
- **Line 9:** "gathers," "gold," "against"

- **Line 10:** "crushed," "rock," "randomly"
- **Line 11:** "glinting," "short"
- **Line 12:** "shower"
- **Line 14:** "turn," "campfirelit," "faces," "hesitancy," "speak"
- **Line 15:** "earth," "rolling"
- **Line 16:** "behind," "man," "down"
- **Line 17:** "mussels," "arrangement"
- **Line 18:** "ocean," "shallowed"
- **Line 19:** "hour's," "light," "left," "there's," "excrescent"
- **Line 20:** "sponging," "last"
- **Line 21:** "slams," "heavy," "wave," "door," "sea," "floor," "shudders"
- **Line 22:** "Down," "alone," "so," "late," "surge," "black," "fissure"

ASSONANCE

[Assonance](#) appears at key moments of the poem. For example, the long /e/ sound weaves its way through the first two stanzas:

Nobody comes up from the sea as late as this
in the day and the season, and nobody else goes
down

the last steep kilometre, wet-metalled where
a shower passed shredding the light which keeps

This long /e/ connects every aspect of the landscape, from the time of year ("season"), to the treacherous descent toward the water ("steep"), to the water itself ("sea"), to the light that continues ("keeps") falling from the sky.

Later, long /o/ sounds connect "go" and "so," creating an [internal rhyme](#) as the speaker describes the way the man on the beach and the sun simultaneously descend toward the ocean. In addition to simply adding musicality to the speaker's language, this assonance connects the man's descent to the movement of the sun, suggesting that the man's death will be as natural as the setting sun.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Nobody," "sea"
- **Line 2:** "season"
- **Line 3:** "steep," "wet," "metalled"
- **Line 4:** "keeps"
- **Line 6:** "thickening," "thinning"
- **Line 8:** "keeps," "emptying"
- **Line 10:** "is," "bits"
- **Line 12:** "go," "so"
- **Line 18:** "three," "meters"
- **Line 19:** "left," "excrescent"
- **Line 21:** "door," "floor"
- **Line 22:** "go," "alone," "so"

SIBILANCE

The poem contains many moments of [sibilance](#), in which /s/ and /sh/ sounds connect words and add a pleasant hissing quality to the language. This helps convey the sound of falling rain and crashing ocean waves.

For example, in the first three lines ("Nobody comes up [...] wet-metalled where"), sibilant /s/ sounds [alliterate](#) to connect "sea," "season," and "steep. These /s/ sounds link the time of year (the "season") to the danger of the ("steep") descent toward the water (the "sea"). They also hiss in a way that is reminiscent of the sound of surf breaking against the shore.

Similarly, the speaker uses the /sh/ sound in line 4, saying:

a shower passed shredding the light which keeps

This /sh/ sound creates a slight [onomatopoeia](#), mimicking the noise of falling rain and even the light tearing sound of something "shredding" apart. Sibilance thus enables the speaker to emphasize certain words while also adding evocative sound-related textures to the language.

Where Sibilance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "sea"
- **Line 2:** "season," "else"
- **Line 3:** "last," "steep"
- **Line 4:** "shower," "passed," "shredding," "keeps"
- **Line 5:** "its," "sky," "summits"
- **Line 8:** "keeps," "lasts"
- **Line 9:** "sea," "against"
- **Line 11:** "short"
- **Line 12:** "shower," "so"
- **Line 13:** "sun," "gets," "first"
- **Line 14:** "faces," "hesitancy," "speak"
- **Line 16:** "this," "sea"
- **Line 17:** "mussels"
- **Line 18:** "ocean," "shallowed," "seven"
- **Line 19:** "excrecent"
- **Line 20:** "sponging," "last"
- **Line 21:** "slams," "sea," "shudders"
- **Line 22:** "so," "surge"

Summits (Line 5) - The peaks or tallest points of hills or mountains.

Vapours (Line 6) - "Vapours" (spelled "vapors" in American English) refers to a mist of some kind.

Credibly (Line 7) - Believably or convincingly. In this context, the word might also mean "realistically" or even "naturally," since the speaker uses it to describe the fact that the light coming out of the sky looks simultaneously ordinary or natural *and* heavenly.

Half Celestial (Line 7) - "Celestial" means heavenly or refers to something that is reminiscent of the sky. The speaker says that the light coming from the sky seems almost heavenly.

Dammed (Line 7) - A dam holds back or restricts the flow of water. The speaker suggests that the sky has built up a "reservoir" of sunlight, indicating that this light now floods over the reservoir's dam like water pouring over the earth.

Glinting (Line 11) - Glowing or reflecting light.

Wetted (Line 11) - The speaker says the rocks are "wetted," meaning they've been made wet by the rain.

Campfirelit (Line 14) - This made-up compound word describes the way that the boys' faces are illuminated by a nearby campfire.

Hesitancy (Line 15) - "Hesitancy" means tentativeness or reluctance.

Arrangement (Line 17) - An "arrangement" is a kind of agreement between two parties. In this context, the poem implies that the man has a pre-arranged appointment with the ocean.

Three Point Seven Meters (Line 18) - A metric unit of measurement that is roughly equivalent to twelve feet.

Excrecent (Line 19) - A growth of some kind. The word can also describe an undesired blotch or protuberance. The implication, then, is that the speaker sees the appearance of the moon as an unwelcome development in the sky—one that swells in the fading light.

Sponging (Line 20) - Soaking something up. The word can also [colloquially](#) refer to stealing.

Shudders (Line 21) - To tremble or shake.

Surge-Black (Line 22) - A made-up compound adjective that describes the crack in the ocean floor as a rushing, dark abyss.

Fissure (Line 22) - A deep crack or split.



VOCABULARY

Kilometre (Line 3) - A unit of measurement in the metric system that corresponds to roughly .6 miles. (In American English, the word is spelled "kilometer.")

Wet-metalled (Line 3) - This hyphenated word describes how the rocks in the descent to the beach have become slippery in the rain, as if they're metal covered in water.

Shredding (Line 4) - Tearing something into pieces.



FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"You Will Know When You Get There" is not written in a traditional poetic form, but it *does* follow a specific structure.

Made up of 22 lines, the poem is divided into [couplets](#). This gives it a straightforward, organized feel that offsets the speaker's dense language, which can—at times—be hard to follow.

At the same time, the speaker's frequent use of [enjambment](#) works against the cleanly separated couplets, making the language sound like it's falling forward even though the lines are technically broken up in a very digestible way. By extending complex sentences over the line breaks, the speaker manages to make an otherwise simple form feel somewhat sprawling, forcing readers to fight their way through the poem.

But this is not to say that the poem feels completely unstructured. Rather, the couplets create a gradual sense of escalation, thus mimicking the way the person on the beach slowly approaches the sea and, in doing so, nears death.

METER

As a [free verse](#) poem, "You Will Know When You Get There" has no set [meter](#). This absence of meter makes the poem sound almost like natural speech, as the speaker's words flow freely from line to line.

The use of free verse also aligns with the spoken quality of the speaker's language, which includes invented compound words ("wet-metalled") and the use of the second-person pronoun, "you." Along with the lack of a rigid rhythmic pattern, these things create a sense of casual familiarity, drawing readers into the poem.

At the same time, the language of the poem is highly musical. Even though it has no set meter, the poem's dense clusters of sound make the poem seem almost otherworldly. This gives readers the feeling that even though this man simply walks toward the sea, something much more significant is at play; a larger transition is about to take place, and the unconstrained musicality hints at the profound nature of what's about to happen.

RHYME SCHEME

"You Will Know When You Get There" is a [free verse](#) poem, so it has no fixed rhyme scheme. However, several moments of [internal rhyme](#) and [slant rhyme](#) create music in the poem.

In the second stanza ("the last steep [...] light which keeps"), for example, "steep" finds a close rhyme in "keeps." This rhyme aligns the two words and emphasizes how the light continues to "pour" out of the sky, even as the person in the poem walks down a dark embankment toward the sea and the day draws to a close.

Then, in stanzas three and four ("ouring out [...] light lasts"), the words "thickening," "thinning" and "emptying" create a kind of slant rhyme. This slant rhyme is based on the "-ing" sound, thus highlighting the continual form of these verbs, which in turn accentuates the sense of continuous movement and change

within the landscape.

In the sixth stanza, the internal rhyme between "go" and "so" connects the person making the descent (referred to as "you" at this point in the poem) with the sun, which is *also* descending. Here, the internal rhyme suggests that the man's descent to his own death is connected to the natural movement of the sun.

Finally, in the last stanza, the word "door" forms an internal rhyme with "sea-floor." Even though this internal rhyme emphasizes the power of the wave that "slams" like a door against the man, the sounds in this moment are remarkably soft. The /sh/ sound in "fissure" and "shudders" gives the language a hushed quality, while the /er/ sound at the end of the words adds a kind of rhyming musicality that is quite pleasing to the ear. These gentle, satisfying sounds suggest that, although the man has been carried away to sea, death isn't necessarily something to fear—instead, these slant rhymes imply that there's something alluring and even calming about death.



SPEAKER

The speaker of "You Will Know When You Get There" remains unnamed throughout the poem, but readers can still gather certain information about this person. For instance, the speaker seems familiar with the landscape the poem describes. The speaker knows that at this particular beach, "[n]obody comes up from the sea as late as this / in the day and the season." In other words, the speaker is versed in local knowledge about this particular location, knowing when it's safe to go to the sea when it's not.

This suggests that the speaker is connected to the poem's landscape, which many readers believe is Karekare Beach, a black sand beach in New Zealand. Since the poet, Allen Curnow, was from New Zealand, some readers see the speaker as Curnow himself.

Regardless of whether the speaker is Curnow, though, the poem takes place in an almost deserted scene. There are only two young boys by a campfire and one other person making a descent toward the water. The speaker's voice therefore comes to seem somewhat omniscient, functioning as a narrative force rather than a specific person. In this role as a narrator, the speaker puts readers themselves at the center of the poem's action, addressing them as "you" and, in doing so, making the events of the poem seem somewhat universal, implying that everyone will eventually make this [metaphorical](#) trip to the sea at the end of their life.



SETTING

The poem is set near the sea, where a person (referred to as "you") must make a steep, somewhat treacherous descent

toward the water. It's evening, and though the light fades quickly, there's still "one hour's light" remaining. It's also raining, making the stones underfoot slippery. This makes the journey to the sea even more dangerous, but it also adds great beauty to the scene, since the rocks "glint[]" in the dying sunlight.

The speaker describes this setting as "half-celestial." It is a very real setting—with concrete details like rocks, clouds, and trees—and readers often take the setting to be the actual KareKare black sand beach in New Zealand, which is at the base of steep cliffs. At the same time, though, the way the light and the rain appear in the sky—and the way the evening sun appears gold against the waves—makes the entire scene seem almost "celestial" or heavenly. The setting, then, inhabits a space between the living world and heaven in the same way that the person in the poem seems to move through a liminal space between life and death.



CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

"You Will Know When You Get There" first appeared in Allen Curnow's 1982 collection of the same name. The collection as a whole explores themes of fate and the interconnection between life and death—themes that are present in the poem as well, as the speaker implies that death is natural and ought to be embraced.

Curnow was influenced by Modernist poets like [Ezra Pound](#) and [T.S. Eliot](#). This influence is evident in the "You Will Know When You Get There," as the speaker [alludes](#) to Pound's *Cantos* in the line, "it gathers the gold against / it." Interestingly, before he became a poet, Curnow was in seminary to become an Anglican priest. Although he left the seminary, religious questions and considerations often appear in his poetry. For example, as "You Will Know When You Get There" describes what it's like to approach death, the speaker describes the scene as "half celestial," suggesting that there's something heavenly or even otherworldly about the landscape.

Curnow himself had a significant impact on the trajectory of poetry in New Zealand. He argued that New Zealand writers must write about their experience in their own country instead of trying to adopt the dominant aesthetic and concerns of English poetry. While his argument was controversial at the time, writers eventually embraced the idea, and Curnow is now considered a major—and majorly influential—New Zealand poet. The New Zealand landscape is vividly present in "You Will Know When You Get There," and many readers believe the poem is based on [KareKare Beach](#), a famous black-sand beach in Auckland.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"You Will Know When You Get There" was published in 1982.

During this time, cultures around the world were shifting away from organized religion to become increasingly secular. With this shift, cultural views of death also changed: whereas religious societies might have seen death as something preordained by a higher power, a secular view might regard death as a simple fact of life and nothing more.

In a way, the poem reflects some of these cultural shifts. The poem implies that there can, in some ways, be a *right time* to die, and that the man approaching the sea does so because he has an "arrangement"—a kind of preordained appointment—with the "tide" and the end of his own life. At the same time, the poem also conveys a sense of doubt or mystery about what the man will encounter once he has died. The image of the "surge-black fissure" hints at the powerful forces of the natural world and is more in keeping with a secular view of death—namely, that in dying, one simply enters a vast nothingness.

Such concerns align with Allen Curnow's interest in religion. As the son of a clergyman, he grew up quite religious and even attended St. John's Theological College as a young man. It was during this period of his life that he began writing poems, so it makes sense that his work engages—in some way or another—with profound questions about existence, death, and what happens after the end of a person's life.



MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- [Acclaim for "You Will Know When You Get There"](#) — Read more about the collection this poem appeared in and the awards the book won. (<https://aucklanduniversitypress.co.nz/you-will-know-when-you-get-there-poems-1979-81/>)
- [Biography of Allen Curnow](#) — Read more about Allen Curnow's life and his work as a major New Zealand poet in this biographical article from the New Zealand Government History website. (<https://nzhistory.govt.nz/people/allen-curnow>)
- [Picture of KareKare Beach](#) — View a photograph of KareKare Beach in New Zealand, where many readers believe the poem is set. (<https://www.newzealand.com/us/feature/aucklands-west-coast-beaches/>)
- [The Borrowed Line](#) — Read more about the line from Pound's *Cantos* that the speaker alludes to in "You Will Know When You Get There." (<https://cawkwell200.com/2016/10/06/in-the-gloom-the-gold/>)



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