Practical Tactic No. 1

Circle the full stops. Read the poem as a series of sentences and only pause where punctuation indicates.

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**“To help the monkey**

**cross the river”**

which he must

cross, by swimming, for fruits and nuts,

to help him

I sit, with my rifle, on a platform

high in a tree, same side of the river

as the hungry monkey. How does this assist

him? When he swims for it

I look first up river: predators move faster with

the current than against it.

If a crocodile is aimed from up river to eat the monkey

and an anaconda from down river burns

with the same ambition, I do

the math, angles, rate-of-monkey

croc and snake speed, and if, *if*

it looks like the anaconda or the croc

will reach the monkey

before he attains the river’s far bank,

I raise my rifle and fire

one, two, three, even four times, into the river

just behind the monkey

to hurry him up a little.

Shoot the snake, the crocodile?

They are just doing their jobs,

but the monkey, the monkey

has little hands, like a child’s

and the smart ones, in a cage, can be taught to smile.

Thomas Lux

Practical Tactic No. 2

Circle key conjunctions. (BUT - a change or contradiction is coming; AND - development of the same idea is coming; SO - a conclusion is about to be drawn.)

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**“Planting a Sequoia”**

All afternoon my brothers and I have worked in the orchard,

Digging this hole, laying you into it, carefully packing the soil.

Rain blackened the horizon, but cold winds kept it over the Pacific,

And the sky above us stayed the dull grey

Of an old year coming to an end.

In Sicily a father plant a tree to celebrate his first son’s birth –

An olive or a fig tree – a sign that the earth has one more life to bear.

I would have done the same, proudly laying new stock into my father’s orchard

A green sapling rising among the twisted apple boughs

A promise of new fruit in other autumns.

But today we kneel in the cold planting you, our native giant,

Defying the practical custom of our fathers,

Wrapping in your roots a lock of hair, a piece of an infant’s birth cord,

All that remains above earth of a first-born son,

A few stray atoms are brought back to the elements.

We will give you what we can – our labour and our soil,

Water drawn from the earth when the skies fail,

Nights scented with the ocean fog, days softened by the circuit of bees.

We plant you in the corner of the grove, bathed in western light.

A slender shoot against the sunset.

And when our family is no more, all of his unborn brothers dead,

Every niece and nephew scattered, the house torn down,

His mother’s beauty ashes in the air,

I want you to stand among strangers, all young and ephemeral to you,

Silently keeping the secret of your birth.

Dana Gioia

Practical Tactic No. 3

Juxtaposition underpins everything! Seek out opposites/binary oppositions. If you see “dark,” look for “light.” Then ask, which does the poet prefer?

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**Hello day – worldwide**

**(on a radio announcement of that today is World Hello Day**

In their town

Where good morning

Is offensive

And the very audacity

To offer unsolicited

Provocative,

Maybe they need

A hello day,

A gesture, a token

Of what could have been.

Here in our village

A man must show cause

Why he passes his neighbor

And did not greet

And ask how he is

And how is home.

In our village too

We need to be reconciled

From strain and friction –

But we require more than a day:

The grief-joy mixture

Of knowing and being known

Takes a lifetime to drink.

So if a day must be declared

Then let it be

The beginning of a

Lifetime commitment

To the unbarring

Of windows and gates,

The demolition of fences and walls,

The abolition

Of border ports

And entry permits

Or maybe

All they really want

Is a hello day, no more;

So they can say hello

Contrapted

Like a toothpaste smile,

Limp

Like their cold fingers-shake.

Maybe all they want

Is the momentary flash, the quick open-lock

Of the shutters

Of the soul.

That way no light comes in

That will wake

Their conscience

Disturb their greed

And we

We follow in their train.

Kobina Eyi Acquah

Practical Tactic No. 4

Examine pronouns. (1st singular - sincerity, trust, posessive; 1st plural - unity, togetherness; 2nd person - invites resposne, can be accusatory, direct address; 3rd singular - can appear objective, unbiased; 3rd plural - can blame others…) What tone do the pronouns develop?

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**“The Cat’s Song”**

Mine, says the cat, putting out his paw of darkness.

My lover, my friend, my slave, my toy, says

the cat making on your chest his gesture of drawing

milk from his mother’s forgotten breasts.

Let us walk in the woods, says the cat.

I’ll teach you to read the tabloid of scents,

to fade into shadow, wait like a trap, to hunt.

Now I lay this plump warm mouse on your mat.

You feed me, I try to feed you, we are friends,

says the cat, although I am more equal than you.

Can you leap twenty times the height of your body?

Can you run up and down trees? Jump between roofs?

Let us rub our bodies together and talk of touch.

My emotions are pure as salt crystals and as hard.

My lusts glow like my eyes. I sing to you in the mornings

walking round and round your bed and into your face.

Come I will teach you to dance as naturally

as falling asleep and waking and stretching long, long.

I speak greed with my paws and fear with my whiskers.

Envy lashes my tail. Love speaks me entire, a word

of fur. I will teach you to be still as an egg

and to slip like the ghost of wind through the grass.

Marge Piercy

Practical Tactic No. 5

Substitution. Ask “Why didn’t the poet use the word \_\_\_\_\_ instead?”

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**“The Novelist”**

Why not: foggy day? or rainfall? and analyse...

Encased in talent like a uniform,

The rank of every poet is well known;

They can amaze us like a **thunderstorm,**

Or die so young, or live for years alone.

They can **dash** forward like hussars: but he

Discuss: why not gallop? run?...

Must struggle out of his boyish gift and learn

How to be plain and awkward, how to be

One after whom none think it worth to turn.

For, to achieve his lightest wish, he must

Become the whole of boredom, subject to

Vulgar complaints like love, among the Just

Be just, among the filthy filthy too,

And in his own weak person, if he can,

Dully put up with all the wrongs of Man.

W. H. Auden

Practical Tactic No. 6

Sound patterns are secondary. (e.g. Alliteration - easy to identify but HARD to explain why it has been used. It is used to enhance meanings and the connections between words.) Comment on the BIG IDEAS first - these are supported or enhanced by sound...

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**Seascape**

Look, stranger, on this island now

The leaping light for your delight discovers,

Stand stable here

And silent be,

That through the channels of the ear

May wander like a river

The swaying sound of the sea.

Here at a small field’s ending pause

When the chalk wall falls to the foam and its tall ledges

Oppose the pluck

And knock of the tide,

And the shingle scrambles after the suck-

-ing surf,

And a gull lodges

A moment on its sheer side.

Far off, like floating seeds the ships

Diverge on urgent voluntary errands,

And this full view

Indeed may enter

And move in memory as now these clouds do,

That pass the harbour mirror

And all the summer through the water saunter.

W. H. Auden

Practical Tactic No. 7

Skip the parenthetical. First reading - skip from dash to dash to aide understanding. On second reading, include them.

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During that summer  
When unicorns were still possible;  
When the purpose of knees   
Was to be skinned;  
When shiny horse chestnuts  
    (Hollowed out  
    Fitted with straws  
    Crammed with tobacco  
    Stolen from butts  
    In family ashtrays)  
Were puffed in green lizard silence  
While straddling thick branches  
Far above and away  
From the softening effects  
Of civilization;

During that summer--  
Which may never have been at all;  
But which has become more real  
Than the one that was--  
Watermelons ruled.

Thick imperial slices   
Melting frigidly on sun-parched tongues  
Dribbling from chins;  
Leaving the best part,  
The black bullet seeds,  
To be spit out in rapid fire  
Against the wall  
Against the wind  
Against each other;

And when the ammunition was spent,  
There was always another bite:  
It was a summer of limitless bites,  
Of hungers quickly felt   
And quickly forgotten  
With the next careless gorging.

The bites are fewer now.  
Each one is savored lingeringly,  
Swallowed reluctantly.

But in a jar put up by Felicity,  
The summer which maybe never was  
Has been captured and preserved.  
And when we unscrew the lid  
And slice off a piece  
And let it linger on our tongue:  
Unicorns become possible again.

John Tobias

Practical Tactic No. 8

Examine pairs and three-of-a-kind. Parallel/tripartite constructions intensify the point the poet is making. Look for increasing intensity - crescendo!

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**“Ispahan Carpet”**

Rough timber gallows on which the carpets are woven

By a silent, sallow, dark-eyed Persian family,

Fills the room, bare but for blackened pots and jars

In the cavernous hearth. A flickering fire

Lights on the sensuous jewelled arabesques

Shadowing the makers of the webs.

Eight-year-old girls sit sparrowed on a plank

Rope-rising with the pattern, their unsupported bird-bones

Bent like old women. Only such little fingers,

Following the guides of coloured wool upon the warp

Left by their aunts and sisters,

Can tie such exquisitely minute knots —

One hundred to the square centimeter, says the guide proudly —

For the most desired Tabriz and Karmenshah.

One hundred knots in the space of my thumb-nail,

One hundred heart-beats of a young child’s growing,

One hundred hours for the space a foot will crush down.

O, eyes whose whole horizon is the carpet

And its traditional beauty! Who can unravel

The world’s weaving?

My swollen hand is gentle on the greenstick shoulder

Her large eyes look back at me with a speaking darkness.

Elizabeth Burge

Practical Tactic No. 9

Read poems aloud! (From a standing position. They often choose to read from the lectern.)

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this is thi   
six a clock   
news thi   
man said n   
thi reason   
a talk wia   
BBC accent   
iz coz yi   
widny wahnt   
mi ti talk   
aboot thi   
trooth wia   
voice lik   
wanna yoo   
scruff. if   
a toktaboot   
thi trooth   
lik wanna yoo   
scruff yi   
widny thingk   
it wuz troo.   
jist wanna yoo   
scruff tokn.   
thirza right   
way ti spell   
ana right way   
to tok it. this   
is me tokn yir   
right way a   
spellin. this   
is ma trooth.   
yooz doant no   
thi trooth   
yirsellz cawz   
yi canny talk   
right. this is   
the six a clock   
nyooz. belt up.

Extract from Tom Leonard *Unrelated Incidents* (1984)

Practical Tactic No. 10

Kick the tyres. Give the tyres a good kick before you begin in-depth. (a.k.a. Christmas present reading.)

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**“Perhaps”**

**(To R A L Died of wounds in France, December 23rd 1915)**

Perhaps some day the sun will shine again,  
And I shall see that still the skies are blue,  
And feel once more I do not live in vain,  
Although bereft of You.

Perhaps the golden meadows at my feet  
Will make the sunny hours of spring seem gay,  
And I shall find the white May-blossoms sweet,  
Though You have passed away.

Perhaps the summer woods will shimmer bright,  
And crimson roses once again be fair,  
And autumn harvest fields a rich delight,  
Although You are not there.

But though kind Time may many joys renew,  
There is one greatest joy I shall not know  
Again, because my heart for loss of You  
Was broken, long ago.

Vera Brittain

**Bonus poem**

**“I go back to May 1937”**

I see them standing at the formal gates of their colleges,

I see my father strolling out

under the ochre sandstone arch, the

red tiles glinting like bent

plates of blood behind his head, I

see my mother with a few light books at her hip

standing at the pillar made of tiny bricks,

the wrought-iron gate still open behind her, its

sword-tips aglow in the May air,

they are about to graduate, they are about to get married,

they are kids, they are dumb, all they know is they are

innocent, they would never hurt anybody.

I want to go up to them and say Stop,

don’t do it—she’s the wrong woman,

he’s the wrong man, you are going to do things

you cannot imagine you would ever do,

you are going to do bad things to children,

you are going to suffer in ways you have not heard of,

you are going to want to die. I want to go

up to them there in the late May sunlight and say it,

her hungry pretty face turning to me,

her pitiful beautiful untouched body,

his arrogant handsome face turning to me,

his pitiful beautiful untouched body,

but I don’t do it. I want to live. I

take them up like the male and female

paper dolls and bang them together

at the hips, like chips of flint, as if to

strike sparks from them, I say

Do what you are going to do, and I will tell about it.

Sharon Olds