

# Reader's Guide to *Into the Cyclorama*

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## PART ONE

*Into the Cyclorama* seems obsessed with history—the difficulty of piecing one together and the desire to do so. The book closes the first poem with the discovery, “At the center of my life I find these holes,” then guides us through a gallery of family portraits. The last poem in Part One depicts the speaker and her father looking at a historical document: a map of Korea at the time of the Korean War.

1. All of the family characters in Part One struggle to make sense of their histories, sometimes even withholding them. “Prelude and Fugue,” for example, shows the grandmother giving sparse information to her son about his missing father. “The Fall, Rehearsed” and “Historia” relate poignant origin stories about the grandmother and the father. How does “Map of Korea, 1950” fit within this context?

Are the perspectives of the father and daughter in this poem different, and, if so, how does that tension inform other poems in this section? What is accomplished by placing this poem last in Part One?

2. If one aim of this book is to collect histories—whole or fractured—the poems in Part One do this in various ways, with varying levels of clarity. Which poems do this primarily in straightforward ways, and which employ techniques that fragment the telling of these stories? How do these techniques affect your emotional response to the poems?
3. Now choose your favorite poem in this section and imagine rewriting it from an “opposite” stylistic approach. What would be gained or lost by that revision?

## PART TWO

Throughout this section we enter numerous works of art and photography, beginning with the head of a giant bronze Buddha the speaker enters while touring Japan. Figuratively speaking, we enter museums and collages in “The Bronze Helmet (a Retrospective),” a colossal battlefield painting in “Cyclorama,” and a war photograph in “Apology to Aristotle.” Part Two closes with another Buddhist scene, this time an esoteric fire ritual that ends in an image of bodily dissolution.

4. In the poetic “ekphrastic” tradition, the poet writes in response to an intense examination of a work of art. Hesiod’s “The Shield of Herakles,” quoted at the beginning of the book, is an example. Typically, the ekphrastic poem offers insights both into the artwork and into the speaker’s own life. How does “Apology to Aristotle” follow that tradition or depart from it?
5. Violence—both physical and political—emerges in several poems. Which moments of depicted violence struck you as being the most meaningful and why? How would you describe the speaker’s attitude or attitudes as a witness to violence?
6. “The Bronze Helmet (a Retrospective)” has ten sections that alternate between poetry and prose. Why do you think “Didactic” and “Twentieth-Century Textbook” are written in prose?

How do the academic tone and dense content of these sections affect your response to these sections?

- a. One way to enter this poem is to focus on its characters. Can you track any narrative or emotional developments in the main speaker (Kim/poet), the father, the grandmother, Sohn Kee-chung, or the bronze helmet itself?
  - b. "Fragment of a Play" doesn't seem to be a real fragment of a Greek play, but a piece Kim wrote in imitation of Greek drama. Is this an homage, a pastiche, or something else? Does this form create any effects that wouldn't have been created in a form like contemporary free verse?
7. Given that "Cyclorama" provides the book's title, you might expect it to cast a light on something crucial about the book's themes and preoccupations. Does it? Are there particular moments of discovery that seem significant? If so, what did those moments make clearer (or murkier)?
  8. At a formal level, "Cyclorama" uses a visual strategy that places sections about the Newtown massacre on the left and sections about the Battle of Gettysburg on the right. What effect does this have on the way you compare and contrast the information we're being given? Imagine doing it differently: how else could you structure the poem in order to convey the two subjects?

### PART THREE

Childhood, memory, and death play central roles in this section. "Go in," says the speaker in the opening poem, "The Collector," and the next several poems take us through meditations on a distant, even alien past. "Post-Colonial Album: 1980" and "Heart Murmur Triptych" go deep into the speaker's childhood, while the last few poems focus on the speaker as an adult contemplating the body's transience.

9. Does this section seem more personal or directly emotional than the prior two sections? If so, how do content, tone, or other formal approaches create this impression? If not, why not?
10. "Post-Colonial Album: 1980" explores the speaker's experience of privilege while growing up in Korea. Does the poem's order or structure contribute to your understanding of that experience?
  - a. The title invokes the idea of a photo album taken from a specific year. How does this framing device affect your reading of the poem?
  - b. Words and bits of dialogue in Korean pop up in the different sections. Do they seem extraneous or significant? Why?
11. In Part Three we see the final poem in the "New World" series that develops over the course of the book. Looking at the four poems in this series, do any dominant themes or concerns emerge? Does the decision to place the poems far apart from each other in the book help or hinder your response to the individual poems and to the series as a whole?

12. Snow appears throughout the book, sometimes quietly, as in “Thin Gold String,” or loudly, as in “Confessions of the Snow.” Snow figures in several poems in Part Three, most noticeably in “More Words for Snow.” What emotions or ideas do the snow images seem to convey? Do their meanings change from poem to poem? By offering interpretations of snow, does “More Words for Snow” color your responses to the other poems?
13. At the end of the book, do you feel a sense of closure, whether emotional or narrative? What contributed most to your sense of closure? Which poem would you have placed at the end, or would you have written a new one?

## WRITE YOUR OWN

- Choose a family member with a past that makes you curious, sad, proud, or angry. Write a poem reconstructing (or making up) some element of this person’s past, looking to the poems in Part One for ideas about approach.
- Think about a musical form that you like (i.e. country western ballad, rock anthem, waltz, rag, string quartet), and do 5 minutes of research about that form. Pick a poem that you’ve drafted but haven’t finished. Now revise your poem using that musical form as a guiding shape.
- What’s a plant, animal, or physical object that appears often in your poems? Make a quick list of words that come to your mind about it, whether they’re alternate names for it, antonyms/synonyms, or associated memories. Then write a list poem taking the most compelling items from your list.