Carried by a song of words

I read a book of poems straight through without stopping. I couldn't help it.

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Last week I hung out with ten other writers at a writing residency. Even more than the gifts of unstructured time, wholesome food, perfect writing weather, and trails for walking, I prized the week of collegiality with writers working in various genres. It's not every day you get to eat breakfast with poets and novelists.

After hearing one of the poets talk about writing, I became intrigued, so I tracked down a volume of her poems (some of which were originally published in this magazine). One evening after dinner I eschewed wine and socializing, hid in my room, and read her book straight through—45 poems in all.

The whole time I read I felt guilty. A voice inside kept saying, *This is the wrong way to read poems. You should savor them, reread the ones that puzzle you, linger over each line*. After all, this is one of my mantras as a seminary professor: We read too fast; slow down!

But that night I couldn't.

I felt even worse because, earlier that day, the poet herself had described her own poems as complex enough to require pondering, to demand rereading.

She was right. And there I was, dashing through them.

The next day I wanted to tell her how much I loved the volume, but I felt sheepish. Should I admit I read the whole thing in one sitting? Would that admission be an affront to a poet and her art?
Except I knew why I couldn't stop reading. The poems carried me along with their song.

Some of them I don't remember and some I didn't understand, but a wave of song carried me from the first poem to the last. I didn't dwell on the intricacies of meaning or parse each figure of speech. No, the dissonances that resolved into assonance, the alliteration and the rhythm, the deft end-rhymes that are so rare these days—together, they swept me along.

These poems possess what Gregory Orr, in his book *Poetry as Survival*, calls incantation. Incantation, he says, is like a "woven raft of sound on which the self floats above the floodwaters of chaos." Once I climbed onto the raft of sound, I didn't want to get off.

And now I'm wondering if this notion of incantation, of song, can help us read not only poetry, but scripture as well.

I teach preaching at a seminary, and too often I hear student sermons that are exegetically precise and technically sound and yet seem written by someone who is tone deaf. The preacher hasn't let the song of the gospel carry the sermon. Maybe the preacher hasn't heard it. All the exegetical niceties can't cover for a sermon that hasn't been birthed on the raft of gospel incantation.

I've experienced something similar lately as I've been reading the stories of Jesus to my nine-year-old daughter before bed. While I want simply to enjoy the stories with

her, she demands explanations of the parts she doesn't understand, some of which I don't understand, either. "Nine o'clock is not the best time for these conversations," I say. But now I wonder if the difficulty is that she hasn't yet learned the sound of the whole song of Jesus' life, and absent the song, some isolated parts sound ill-tuned. We need the song to carry us.

Maybe this is another way of capturing St. Augustine's insight that we should use more transparent texts to help interpret trickier ones: the dissonant chords of scripture should be understood by their place in the whole song.

Yes, we should parse the verbs and untangle the grammar. Yes, we should ponder every phrase, each nuance. Yes, we should return again and again to the troubling passages and attempt to decipher them.

But also: we should listen for the whole song, the gospel incantation. We should hear its puzzling beauty, listen for the way its dissonances eventually resolve into the sonorous assonance of grace. We should learn to sing the song before we interrogate it. And then, when we have to preach, or teach, or talk about scripture to a nine-year-old, the song itself can carry us, can carry our words.