READING COMPANION

Red, by Melanie Braverman

Sample poem:

Fantasia

One week before Halloween the heterosexual
men dressed as women haunt our streets, handbags
slung across their thick wrists like those
IV poles the chronically infirm are forced
to walk around with looking
eager, hopeful, necks rigid
as spars to keep their impeccably
coffied wigs from falling like sails askew in the harbor’s
wind, tastefully
accessorized because for a week at least they don’t
want to be bankers and miscellaneous middle-
management professionals, they want
a life in which the only meal they have to show up
for is lunch, and after that shopping, or a game
of bridge or, better yet, Hearts, they want
to sit for a week in the front
windows of our cafes eating triangular-
cut sandwiches, tipping and expecting
attentive service from the gay
men and lesbians who serve them. This year the heterosexual
men dressed as women appear to have faith that we will not think less of them
if they, by day, forego their stringent four-
inch heels, we are seeing an upsurge
of Keds in feminine colors: fuchsia, tomato, baby
blue, spring
green, with pointy
elongated toes. Perhaps they have been following
some cultural timeline so that now
in their imitation they have entered the moment of women’s liberation, not
the Sixties, these men would never burn
their bras, they believe
in foundation garments the way they must, in their real
lives, believe
in the appropriateness of smaller
government; no, for them it is the early
Seventies, when even upper-middle-class
ladies took off their aprons and began the daily
scandal of wearing
pants, not pantsuits or slacks but the heartier fabrics once
intended only for husbands—denim, corduroy, serge, pants
that did not zip up the side, or like straight-
jackets close up the small
of the back, an era in which these men themselves might have left
their wives who are walking toward us now in Beech
Forest, their husbands slightly behind them with gingham
kerchiefs covering their voluminous artificial hair, picking
their way gingerly down the leaf-strewn path
toward my girlfriend and me, who have been speaking
in low voices about our love, how once we found
each other it seemed wrong-headed to turn away,
even when it meant hurting others, and how
unwomanly that was, and what it could mean
to never be forgiven.

Questions to consider:

1. Is the speaker’s view of desire and love in this collection of poems narrow, or
   expansive? Consider “What I Want.” How does the structure of the poem affirm
   the content?
2. Red frequently juxtaposes desire and grief. What effect does this juxtaposition
   have on the reader? How is that effect created? Consider the title poem.
3. Most of these poems are firmly rooted in Provincetown, Massachusetts. What
   effect does knowing—or not knowing—this place have on the reader? Do these
   poems manage to be universal, while being so specifically sited? Use examples
   from the poems to support your perspective.
4. How do ideas about desire and love change throughout this collection? Consider poems in the first section and in the last.

5. How do poems like “Fantasia,” “Crickets,” and “Butch/Femme” explore gender roles and queerness?

6. Airplanes, and traveling on planes, are recurring images in this collection. What do you think they symbolize? Point to moments in the collection that support your argument.

7. Why do you think Braverman uses both prose poems and free verse? Why do you think she chooses one style over the other in a particular poem? Provide examples.

8. What is the effect of the poem being one long sentence in “Fall”? How does it affect the pacing of the poem?

Writing prompts:

1. Write a poem about adolescence that is organized around a single day or incident, but also that goes beyond that, as Braverman does in “Crickets.”

2. Write a prose poem, and begin the poem by breaking a word into two pieces, between the title and the first line, as Braverman does in “Day.”

3. Try writing a poem from the point of view of an archetypal figure, as Braverman does in “The Hag.” Some other examples include The Lover, The Magician, The Outlaw, The Jester, The Explorer, The Creator, and The Sage. Explore such figures by doing a little research, and let your findings inform your piece.

4. Write a poem using the title “Benediction” and grounding it, as Braverman does, in everyday details.
Other Perugia books that could pair with this collection:

_Girldom_, Megan Peak

_How to Live on Bread and Music_, Jennifer K. Sweeney

_Two Minutes of Light_, Nancy K. Pearson

Areas of study in which to teach this title:

English
Creative Writing/Poetry
Women’s Studies
Queer Studies
Ethnic & Gender Studies
American Studies

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