



PO Box 60364 / Florence, MA 01062
www.perugiapress.org

READING COMPANION

Sweet Husk, by Corrie Williamson

Sample poem:

The Whaler to His Wife

For many months I have slit
open the sea's belly, pulled from inside
her storm-skinned children
and opened them too. I peeled dark
into dark, a new skin within each,
as if a thousand fishes lived in one.

We each have a churning heart, and a song
under our bones. I've cut many out; still
I hear your sleep-sounds
pounding on the deck, wrapped in the blood-soaked
skins of harpoon lines, whipping back to me
down that taut, traveling length.

I come to you with oil burning,
have laid my boots
with their crust of gore
upon the stoop.

Your body, too, is sleek as wind.
Take me into your earthbound bed.
I have not forgotten
the glory of morning-cold blankets--
the stillness of your body
still tight inside them.

Questions to consider:

1. Consider who and what speaks in the poems “Remains” and “The Language of Birds.” Who and what does not speak? How does this create meaning in the poems? How does it connect them to each other?
2. Red appears in multiple poems in this collection. In “The Evolution of Nightmare,” the speaker writes “...Adam means *red*.” (8). In “Where the Sentence Ends the Sentiment Burgeons,” red is used several times. How does the repetition of “red” function among these poems? What effect does it have on the reader?
3. Read “Plath’s Bees” (14). Explore how Sylvia Plath used bees in her poetry. What does the information you discover help you to understand about Williamson’s poem?
4. Identify the verbs used in “The Whaler to His Wife”(16). Explore reasons Williamson may have selected the verbs used in the poem. How do these active words amplify the poem’s meaning?
5. As you read Part 2 “Ruin Song,” look at images of Chaco Canyon. How is Chaco Canyon integral to the poem? How is the concept of a palimpsest (33) used throughout the poem? Why would the poet select this concept when writing about this place? How does the concept inform the entire collection?
6. Throughout the collection, Williamson uses specific language to name insects, animals, and other elements of the natural world. Identify several poems where you notice this, and explore similarities and differences in how such specificity creates a particular effect on the reader.
7. Read the four poems “A Study of the Anthropologist: I” (15), “A Study of the Anthropologist: II” (53), “A Study of the Anthropologist: III” (68), and “A Final Study of the Anthropologist: Self-Portrait” (78). Consider the placement of the poems in the collection and how that placement informs the entire collection. Consider how the four poems work as “a study.” What do we learn about the anthropologist? What are we left wanting to know? Why?

8. Williamson uses a quote from Shakespeare's *Hamlet* as an epigraph for the collection, and references to Shakespeare are found throughout the book. Trace the references and consider what they add to the collection. How do literary references create meaning?

Writing prompts:

1. Read "Plath's Bees" (14). Take a custom you know about (like that of sharing news of a death in the family with the bees) and write a poem that imagines that custom in action.
2. Read "The Whaler to His Wife" (16). Highlight the verbs. What do you notice about them? Create a list of verbs related to an occupation that interests you and use them as you craft a poem of your own.
3. In Part 9 of "Ruin Song" the speaker asks "What is necessary to know?" Write a poem in which you respond to that question.
4. Read "Why the Photograph of George H. Pepper Sitting on a Viga in Pueblo Bonito Reading the Bible Haunts Me" (64). Using the photography database from the Library of Congress or The Smithsonian, select an image that you find haunting and write a poem about it.

Other Perugia books that could pair with this collection:

The Wishing Tomb, Amanda Auchter

Starshine Road, L. I. Henley

Guide to the Exhibit, Lisa Allen Ortiz

Through a Red Place, Rebecca Pelky

Areas of study in which to teach this title:

American Studies

Creative Writing/Poetry

U.S. History

Ethnic & Gender Studies

Women's Studies

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