

READING COMPANION

Through a Red Place, by Rebecca Pelky

Sample poem:

Lost

When Patience disappeared
it was still winter, but late,
so maybe it was shrugged off
as thin ice, until August,
when she still wasn't found.

I wonder what spawned
such late concern. After all,
history tells us,
*These things happen
to Indian girls.* Patience

wasn't my kin, not in the thick
blood way, but more like how
we say Nation and it means
something closer to cousins,
the kind you meet dredging

the same thawed lake
when you're all searching
for different lost things.
Is it enough, if all we have
together is trauma?

Even when homecoming
doesn't feel much like home
in a bare room full of strangers,
here we all are again, all drawn
back to the same place, as if

to be seen, as if to say, *I am
not missing. Not yet. Not today.*

Questions to consider:

1. Why do you think Pelky uses visual source material like photos, newspaper clippings, and maps throughout the collection? How did this choice affect you as a reader? How might you have approached or responded to the collection differently without the visual component?
2. In the poem "Effigy", Pelky quotes from the diary of Fidelia Fielding, the last fluent speaker of Mohegan. Pelky explains in the Notes section that modern Mohegan is partially based on Fielding's diary. How do you feel the poems written in Mohegan differ from the poems written only in English? How does the juxtaposition of the poems in Mohegan and English affect the collection visually and textually?
3. Did you ignore, scan, or attempt to read the poems in Mohegan? Why? What was that experience like for you? How is this relevant to the overall themes of the collection?
4. Why do you think Pelky chose to include the four-page erasure poem "Between the Lines"? Why do you think she chose Andrew Jackson's "On Indian Removal" as the source text? How is the inclusion of erasure significant to the collection as a whole?
5. Acnestis is defined as "the part of the back (or backbone) between the shoulder blades and the loins which an animal cannot reach to scratch." What do the three poems titled "Acnestis" have in common? How does the poet's focus develop over the course of the poems? Why do you think Pelky chose the term Acnestis for these poems?
6. How do poems titled after months of the year, moons, and seasonal touchstones (i.e. "Punipukat/Falling Leaves") serve to mark time and for whom do they hold space in *Through a Red Place*?

7. Examine the juxtaposition of the poems “Heartberry Moon” and the following poem “Gone”. How are these poems in dialogue with one another? More broadly, discuss the ways in which Pelky uses simple nature lyrics to advance the themes of the collection?
8. In the poem “Lost” Pelky writes:

“Patience

wasn't my kin, not in the thick
blood way, but more like how
we say Nation and it means
something closer to cousins,
the kind you meet dredging

the same thawed lake
when you're all searching
for different lost things.
Is it enough, if all we have
together is trauma?”

How does *Through a Red Place* explore the metaphor of dredging a lake for lost things? How does Pelky grapple with, answer, or reconcile the question: “Is it enough, if all we have/together is trauma?”

Writing prompts:

1. Write an ekphrastic poem based on the photo of an ancestor as in the poems “Mixed Blood” and “Acnestis 3”. If you don't have access to ancestral photographs, write about the absence of those artifacts, or imagine what such photographs would have looked like.
2. Write a poem using a news clipping or story that has affected you personally or in a profound way as in the poem “Lost”.

3. Using the poem “Bird Mound Facing Devil’s Lake” as inspiration, write a poem about a geographical feature (lake, river, mountain, etc) that has figured prominently in your life and/or write a poem about a geographical feature which is at the heart of a story told by a community to which you belong.
4. Write a poem inspired by the lines “Some stories are/ told without being spoken. Some stories/ are between mothers and daughters.” from the poem “Landmines”.
5. Create an erasure poem using a historical source text that also has resonance for your own history and/or life experience.

Other Perugia books that could pair with this collection:

Now in Color, Jacqueline Balderrama

Grayling, Jenifer Browne Lawrence

Beg No Pardon, Lynne Thompson

Each Crumbling House, Melody S. Gee

Areas of study in which to teach this title:

Ethnic & Gender Studies

Women’s Studies

American Studies

Creative Writing/Poetry

Indigenous Studies

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