

READING COMPANION

American Sycamore, by Lisbeth White

Sample Poem:

Origin of Earth

children not hers drank &
drank flood from her
wrists snapped veins
of water the land
of her body broken
loam

my father's mother's mother
crouched underground

i crave dirt into my mouth

who will love this black body
the thingness
it has become?

each morning i scatter myself
beneath the floorboards

Questions to consider:

1. White often makes use of caesuras to break up her lines. For example, in the poem "Hull" (p. 10) every line contains a caesura. Focusing on this poem or another of your choice, what is the function of the caesura? How does it change both the rhythm and the meaning of the line? Why might White be drawn to this poetic device?
2. In the first of the "Bridge" series of poems, "Bridge (they think I am Dutch)" (p. 13), White asks: "Because eventually diaspora relocates origin?" In this series, where does White find her origin or question the idea of origin? What does the image of the bridge suggest about this journey of self-discovery and relocation?
3. Another series of poems is titled "Awakening of Stones" and follows the form of an academic study. How does this form reflect or change the content of the poems? And how do these poems complicate the idea of "academic" writing?
4. Many poems in the collection are titled after a type of tree, such as "American Sycamore" (p. 19). Choose two of these poems and identify what metaphorical, historical, and cultural meanings White ascribes to the trees. If you can, look up pictures of the trees for reference. How does the form or content of the poem relate to the visual aesthetics of each type of tree?
5. In what ways do the poems "Myth, Seminal" (p. 6) and "Myth, Amniotic" (p. 27) serve as origin myths? Look up the concept of "origin myths" if needed. Why are they titled "Seminal" and "Amniotic," and what might this division imply? What do the formal elements of these poems reveal about the themes of origins and parentage?
6. There are four poems that follow the naming scheme "Origin of." In addition to the title, how do these four poems form a series? Identify the historical references throughout this series and think about how White connects the past to the present. What makes these poems "origin" stories?
7. The second section of the book, "Calypso," is one poem told in three parts. How does the story change between the three sections of the poem? Why might the poem's form transform throughout? Research the mythical figure Calypso and compare the myth to the story White tells. Where do you see connections, and where does White deviate from the original myth? For context, White explains that her poem retells a myth using source material that is itself a retelling, having drawn on the Disney *Pirates of the Caribbean* Calypso character to inform her own Calypso. Knowing this, discuss the impacts of retelling an ever-shifting myth.

8. The collection ends with the poem "Residence Time" (p. 75). Where does the poem broaden or narrow its focus, and how does it tie together events of geologic and personal scale? Why might White have ended the collection with this poem, and what is the effect of setting it apart in its own section?

Writing prompts:

1. Write a poem in the form of an outline, using "Awakening of Stones: An Outline" (p.11) as a guide. Alternatively, take a poem you have already written and put it into the form of an outline. In both cases, experiment with indentations and groupings to create meaning.
2. Using the themes of origins and myths that appear throughout the book as inspiration, write a poem that is an origin myth for yourself. You might think about ancestors, locations, historical events, personal memories, or even biology.
3. Write a poem honoring an elder, as White does in "Seeds from My Grandmother's Hair" (p. 3). Use your own memories, stories you were told about your ancestor, and/or historical research for inspiration.
4. Choose a mythical figure and retell their story through the lens of your reality, as White does in "Calypso." Allow yourself to expand upon the myth, perhaps even reversing the original roles.

Other Perugia books that could pair with this collection:

Beg No Pardon, by Lynne Thompson

Each Crumbling House, by Melody S. Gee

Now in Color, by Jacqueline Balderrama

Through a Red Place, by Rebecca Pelky

Areas of study in which to teach this title:

Women's Studies

Creative Writing/Poetry

Ethnic & Gender Studies

American Studies

African American Studies

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