

READING COMPANION

Finding the Bear, by Gail Thomas

Sample Poem:

Elephant Dream

for Mollie Hartman Zimmerman

I first smelled wildness at a zoo
in a mining city where my father lifted
me to reach through bars to Tillie.
I looked into her small, unblinking eye
fringed with dusty lashes, wondered
how she slept with urine rising from
wet cement, no breeze or grasses,
no shade, no dirt to roll in,
no little birds to sit on her head,
no baby to hold her tail across savannahs.

That night I dreamed rivers of grey flesh,
wrinkled knees, feet pacing a cell,
eyes the color of mud, and awoke
in my grandmother's apartment.
She walked measured blocks to church,
butcher shop, bakery, then back
to the kitchen to find the only delight,
yellow butter mints that melted
slow and smooth in our mouths.
She reeled towels out across the lot,
then let me pull them back, flopping
like fish from distant seas.
After supper she dressed with jewelry,

face powder, Blue Grass perfume
for our trip to the porch to sit
in green rockers and count cars.
She waited for dark to press
its thumb on the coal-dusted street.
Before bed she sat before a three-sided mirror,
removed hairnet, cradled jewelry in soft,
pink pouches. I saw her pale skin wrinkle
and slide over a map of watery veins.
When it was my turn, I angled the mirror
to catch the image echoed, one girl
behind the other. When I turned my head
I caused a flurry of wild motion,
hundreds of eyes looking away.

Questions to consider:

1. Read the poems for which the book's four sections are named: "Nightbird" (p. 11), "Talking Women" (p. 36), "Finding the Bear" (p. 51), and "What the Leaves Say" (p. 69). Notice how the speaker interacts with the natural world. Is nature a teacher, a sanctuary, a friend, or a threat? Find examples to support your response. What is there to be learned from nature?
2. The relationship between mothers and daughters is a central and recurring theme in this book. Identify three poems for which the mother-daughter relationship is integral and compare the images Thomas employs. When does she give specific details, and what does she obscure or reveal through metaphor?
3. In the poem "Grandmother's Story" (p. 16), Thomas embodies the voice of her grandmother. How does this shift in perspective alter the grandmother-granddaughter relationship? How does Thomas grapple with gendered roles and rules in the voice of her grandmother? How much of this poem feels "true"? Does it present a different idea of "truth"? How?

4. The poem "Lost Brother" (p. 25) is followed by "Letter to Portland" (p. 26), which seems to be reaching out to the same figure of a lost brother. What is the effect of putting these two poems next to one another? What would change in your understanding as a reader if one poem was removed from the context of the other?
5. In both "Elephant Dream" (p. 20) and "Finding the Bear" (p. 51), Thomas retells a dream inspired by an animal. What do the animal figures in these two poems reveal about the human characters? What is the function of the dream as a narrative device in these poems?
6. The poems "Landlocked" (p. 44), "Artist" (p. 45), and "Carving" (p. 46) all briefly describe the women they are written for, forming a triptych of glimpses into other lives. How do each of these three poems deal with domesticity and imagination, hardship and creativity? What do they show about the function of art in daily life?
7. In the poem "To Adriene," Thomas writes: "I needed to name / the hollowness of motherhood, / not the babies, but the assumptions / that made me invisible" (p. 37). Where else in the book does motherhood feel hollowed out by assumptions? Which poems attempt to heal that hollowness or reverse those assumptions?
8. Many of the poems in the final section of the collection deal with grief and loss, whether directly or indirectly. Choose two of these poems and compare the literary devices Thomas uses, such as repetition, alliteration, and metaphor. How does her language grapple with what has been lost and what remains? What do these poems convey about the role of making art in the experience of grief?

Writing prompts:

1. Write a poem in three stanzas, where the first and last line of each stanza is the same, as in "Mother Knot" (p. 14). Experiment with syntax and line breaks to make the repetition feel more natural or emphasized.

2. Using “Her Marriage” (p. 40) as inspiration, write a short poem that describes something entirely in metaphor. Choose metaphoric language that is related but adjacent to the topic, as Thomas does by using food rotting in a refrigerator, a facet of domestic life, to describe a slowly crumbling marriage.
3. Write a poem in which you translate your reality into the language of fairy tales, as Thomas does in the poem “Fairy Tale” (p. 62). Decide where to obscure the truth and where to reveal it.
4. Write a poem in which a lesson is learned through interaction with the natural world. You might look at “For Daughters” (p. 29), “Finding the Bear” (p. 51), and “What the Leaves Say” (p. 69) for examples.

Other Perugia books that could pair with this collection:

Red, by Melanie Braverman

Girldom, by Megan Peak

Lamb, by Frannie Lindsay

Gloss, by Ida Stewart

Areas of study in which to teach this title:

Women’s Studies

Creative Writing/Poetry

Queer Studies

Ethnic & Gender Studies

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