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READING COMPANION

Guide to the Exhibit, by Lisa Allen Ortiz

Sample poem:

Parkinson's Disease, Late Stage Ghazal

Here at night the animals stir from their caves and nests,
all the starlit dens and trees emptied of their curled sorrows.

We made a list before I left, and in the margins you wrote
don't forget. The letters darted up the page like swallows.

Beside your bed, I peeled an orange in one piece and showed you
the spiral skin. What sweet sections-the wholeness, hollow.

I had questions about the world, and you nodded, gave all the strange
things names. Now I search your shelf for a field guide to sorrow.

You told us about bears and foxes, timid birds, honeyed nests
of bees. Now look what the green-black forest swallowed.

Questions to consider:

1. Look up the term “animism” and explore its role throughout the collection. How are animals used as symbols and metaphors? How do poems like “Bed-Makers Are Happier,” or “Glacier Your Body,” which do not reference or depict animals/animism, tie into the rest of the collection?
2. How does the collection explore the process of grieving and impermanence? What role does the title play, and how is that title present in the poems? Consider “The Beginners Guide to Birding” as a starting point.
3. How is this collection of poems a “Guide to the Exhibit?” What is the “exhibit,” as the title suggests, and which poems illustrate this most? Why?
4. Think about the role of birds throughout literature. How are they used specifically in the *Guide to the Exhibit*? Which poems featuring or about birds stand out to you most, and why?
5. Using the collection’s first poem, “Admission,” what *is* the admission to this exhibit? What objects might “blind you / if held in the swirl of sun”?
6. What differentiates the poems in Part 1 from Part 2? Are any themes continued or changed? Pick two poems to support your ideas.
7. Read “Patois,” the first poem of Part I. Look up the definition of the word “patois” and explain what you think the “patois” of this poem is. How would you describe the language that defines this book as a whole? Is there an overall “patois” of Ortiz’s collection?
8. How does *Guide to the Exhibit* connect nature and the cultivation and curation of our understanding of nature through museums? Is there a particular poem that illustrates this throughline most? How?

Writing Prompts:

1. Write a poem using any animal as the focal point to depict or express grief, as Lisa Allen Ortiz does in "Bowerbird."
2. In a single poem, or a series of poems, create an "exhibit" using your own lived experiences and observations of nature. Or, use several creatures/objects from the following list from Ortiz's book and place them in your own "exhibit" as you imagine them, or as you have experienced them. Items from Ortiz's book: raven, grizzly bear, orchids, raccoons, meadow, cyanotypes, owl, flower petals, tortoise, and microbes.
3. Using "The Beginner's Guide to Birding" as an example, write your own "Beginner's Guide," using any animal or experience as the subject.
4. Research the ghazal form (here's [a link to a primer](#) from the Academy of American Poets site). Write your own ghazal poem, as Lisa Allen Ortiz does in the poem "Parkinson's Disease, Late Stage Ghazal," that is, in fact, a "field guide to sorrow," as she writes in the poem.

Other Perugia books that could pair with this collection:

Begin Empty-Handed, by Gail Martin
Grayling, by Jenifer Browne Lawrence
Starshine Road, by L. I. Henley
Sweet Husk, by Corrie Williamson

Areas of study in which to teach this title:

Women's Studies
American Studies
Creative Writing/Poetry

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