

READING COMPANION

How to Live on Bread and Music, by Jennifer K. Sweeney

Sample poem:

Nocturne

There is a blue city in mind
constructed slantways

along a rippling canal,
clean and unpeopled but for a musician

who plays a harp without strings.
The city has one chair

where he sits by the broad strokes of water.
A lone streetlamp tends

a blue arc of light.
A Persian door. A zeppelin sky.

The world filters through
his empty frame as he plucks the air.

Maybe you hear a song or maybe you don't.
That is the choice we are always making.

Questions to consider:

1. In "What Call," the speaker says "So much of what has soothed me has not been human." What does the speaker(s) in this collection find soothing?
2. How do the *bread* and *music* of the title appear throughout the collection? Why do you think the poet chose them?
3. In "Yesterday We Watched the Spider Spin," the speaker asks "my dear does the spider mourn / like we do?" How do the poems in this collection look at loss and grief? What tone(s) is used?
4. "Requiem for America" ends with the lines, "we had only / a few moments / to choose." Who is the "we" and what is the choice? How does it relate to the choice at the end of "Nocturne"?
5. Sweeney uses a focus on small details throughout these poems. Consider the effect this has on the reader. Does this strategy pull the reader closer, or keep the reader distant? How?
6. Trains, and traveling on trains, are recurring images in this collection. What do you think they symbolize?
7. How do the poems in this collection move between realism and surrealism? Does Sweeney employ just one of these approaches in a poem, or does she blend the two? Find examples.
8. Find two poems that address Sweeney's theme of nostalgia, and two for the theme of impermanence.

Writing prompts:

1. Write a poem where you list "other things / people wanted nailed down" (lines from "The Arcata and Mad River Railroad").
2. Write a "How To" poem, which, like Sweeney's poems, is not a literal instruction manual, but instead moves toward the absurd and surreal.

3. Try writing a poem that enacts the passage of time, as Sweeney does in “The Listeners.” Use layering as a device, choosing touchstones from your childhood on a common theme to include through the poem, such as favorite books, television shows, music, places traveled, comfort foods, types of birds, etc.
4. Start a poem with the line “Suppose your mother had...” from “Comfort.”

Other Perugia books that could pair with this collection:

The Disappearing Letters, by Carol Edelstein

Girldom, by Megan Peak

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

English

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