

READING COMPANION

Each Crumbling House, by Melody S. Gee

Sample poem:

Migration

After the rain, trees burn with monarchs,
come this winter on dust-and-paper bodies.
Some of the dead cling to trash on the road,

frames of wings like frames of broken windows.
You say you never saw anything like them
in China, though you cannot say for sure.

As a girl, you leashed crickets with ox hairs
and baited bees with sweet tomato flesh.
But nothing like this, you say, like this orange.

This monarch generation lives three times
longer than its parents, than it would without
a migration to complete. They are given

time to break their bodies over mountains
and heave themselves onto warm trees
so they all might survive. Are you wondering

how much more time you have been given
to learn a language and forget a language, to break
your body over an ocean for this pale

redwood dusk and this daughter?
I know you were not drawn here to save
yourself. I cannot tell you that I have

nothing to save, nothing that waits for me
to be drawn, nothing that says, *you must,*
you must break your wings for this.

Questions to consider:

1. How do houses, especially crumbling/unstable houses, appear in these poems, and change throughout the book? Why do you think Gee chose *Each Crumbling House* as the title of this collection?
2. How do poems such as "History Filled In" and "The Voice Before" work with paradoxes such as leaving and returning, beginning and ending?
3. What effect does using plants and animals in these poems have on showing the results of intergenerational trauma? How does it affect the tone of the poems to focus on these non-human symbols? Consider "Where We Are Gathered" and "Migration."
4. What are some themes in *Each Crumbling House*, in addition to that of being a first-generation Asian American? Which poems highlight these themes?
5. Look at how Gee interrogates language itself, the power and the malleability of language for immigrants and speakers of multiple languages, in poems such as "The Flesh and the Valley" and "In Translation."
6. Discuss the importance and symbolism of food and food rituals in poems such as "Eating Bitter" and "Where We Are Gathered."
7. What is the effect of juxtaposing violence or death with celebration and beauty in poems such as "Wedding Day" and "How We Thirst"? What does this tell us about the experience of immigrants and their descendants?
8. The title poem, "Each Crumbling House," is one of many that looks at the complications of memory and history and present time. How do these ideas change throughout this collection?

Writing prompts:

1. In the poem "In Translation," the speaker is trying to translate something that is not translatable. Write a poem that confronts something unexplainable in language or something that cannot be translated into another language, or write a poem that incorporates the mistakes that might arise in attempting such translation.
2. Use the first line of "The Field Is Not Us" as a starting point: "The field is not us."
3. Gee has several poems about visiting places from her mother's childhood. Write a poem in which you return to a place from your family's past.
4. Many of Gee's poems in this collection layer personal history with larger history, especially those where the speaker travels to her mother's childhood home(s). Write a poem that layers a personal story with a larger piece of history, especially tied to a specific place.

Other Perugia books that could pair with this collection:

Beg No Pardon, Lynne Thompson

Gloss, Ida B. Stewart

Now in Color, Jacqueline Balderrama

The Work of Hands, Catherine Anderson

Areas of study in which to teach this title:

Ethnic & Gender Studies

Women's Studies

American Studies

Creative Writing/Poetry

Asian/Asian American Studies

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