

READING COMPANION

Hail and Farewell, by Abby E. Murray

Sample poem:

A Portable Wife

Portable as a jug of water,
easy to lift, easy to set down
and sweet as a tissue-paper bookmark,
the way I hold my husband's place
when wartime calls. I dog-ear
my relationships with women
more efficiently than a sailor,
keep them calling for a week or two
after I leave town, my address book
ballooning in the shoebox like a mushroom.
I teach violin lessons from home,
set up shop and tear it down in minutes,
beat my hand against my thigh
while students I'll know till Christmas
pull horsehair over metal.
I serve beer to men who gather
the bones of their friends
like splintered glass, let their wives
compare my maiden name
to a wound I should allow to heal.
I donate furniture and clothes
with the coolness of a monk,
cram scraps of my childhood into a bin
that slides under the bed.
I check my reflection at night
to make sure creases are forming
where a good wife might find wrinkles,
tell myself I can fold my body up
like a wedding tent and be unrolled
again in a matter of hours.

Questions to consider:

1. How does Murray use her status as an insider/outsider to illuminate places not typically seen (and not typically written about in poetry)? Consider “The War Tramples Us” and “Thank You for Your Service.” Where in your life are you an insider? An outsider? How can you use your status in such places to bring them to light in a new way?
2. Describe the structures of the poems “Tom Calls from Baghdad” and “Homecoming.” How do these structures emphasize the content?
3. Does the speaker’s perspective of gender roles surprise you? How are boys portrayed in this collection, for example, in a poem such as “Poem for Boys”? Can you find other examples of places where gender roles are explored and questioned?
4. Poems including “Hail and Farewell” and “Your Interpreter Sends Me a Housedress” mine the relationship between military personnel and people they interact with in the places where they are stationed. Do these poems simplify or complicate our understanding of those relationships? How?
5. Discuss the way Murray uses tension between two conflicting ideas or images in poems, for example in “When He Receives Orders to Afghanistan and a Parking Ticket: How to Respond.”
6. How does this collection show different aspects of gender performance and the role of a wife in the U.S. (especially a military wife)? Consider poems such as “Prayer on National Childfree Day” and “Jewelry.”
7. Find some of the places in this collection where Murray looks at connections between capitalism and the military. What does her poetry illuminate about each of these?
8. *Hail and Farewell* repeatedly looks straight on at loss and hope, such as in poems like “Gwen Stefani Knows How to Get Everything I Want” and “Between Jobs.” How do the images and word choices in these poems keep them from tipping into melodrama?

Writing prompts:

9. Using the refrain in “When He Receives Orders to Afghanistan and a Parking Ticket: How to Respond,” write a poem repeating and changing a phrase with “make your _____ a _____.”
10. Use a magazine article as a starting point, as Murray does in “Gwen Stefani Knows How to Get Everything I Want.” Try using humor as a device.
11. Start a poem with the line “If he comes back,” from “Rearview Mirror.”
12. Murray has several poems in this collection titled “How To _____.” Write a poem or a series of “How To” poems explaining how to do the things no one has ever explained how to do, but which you decide your reader needs to know.

Other Perugia books that could pair with this collection:

Finding the Bear, Gail Thomas

Starshine Road, L. I. Henley

The Work of Hands, Catherine Anderson

Areas of study in which to teach this title:

Gender Studies

Women’s Studies

American Studies

Creative Writing/Poetry

Sociology

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