

READING COMPANION

*Red*, by Melanie Braverman

Sample poem:

Fantasia

One week before Halloween the heterosexual  
men dressed as women haunt our streets, handbags  
slung across their thick wrists like those  
IV poles the chronically infirm are forced  
to walk around with looking  
eager, hopeful, necks rigid  
as spars to keep their impeccably  
coiffed wigs from falling like sails askew in the harbor's  
wind, tastefully  
accessorized because for a week at least they don't  
want to be bankers and miscellaneous middle-  
management professionals, they want  
a life in which the only meal they have to show up  
for is lunch, and after that shopping, or a game  
of bridge or, better yet, Hearts, they want  
to sit for a week in the front  
windows of our cafes eating triangular-  
cut sandwiches, tipping and expecting  
attentive service from the gay  
men and lesbians who serve them. This year the heterosexual  
men dressed as women appear to have faith that we will not think less of them  
if they, by day, forego their stringent four-  
inch heels, we are seeing an upsurge  
of Keds in feminine colors: fuchsia, tomato, baby  
blue, spring  
green, with pointy  
elongated toes. Perhaps they have been following  
some cultural timeline so that now  
in their imitation they have entered the moment of women's liberation, not  
the Sixties, these men would never burn

their bras, they believe  
in foundation garments the way they must, in their real  
lives, believe  
in the appropriateness of smaller  
government; no, for them it is the early  
Seventies, when even upper-middle-class  
ladies took off their aprons and began the daily  
scandal of wearing  
pants, not pantsuits or slacks but the heartier fabrics once  
intended only for husbands– denim, corduroy, serge, pants  
that did not zip up the side, or like straight-  
jackets close up the small  
of the back, an era in which these men themselves might have left  
their wives who are walking toward us now in Beech  
Forest, their husbands slightly behind them with gingham  
kerchiefs covering their voluminous artificial hair, picking  
their way gingerly down the leaf-strewn path  
toward my girlfriend and me, who have been speaking  
in low voices about our love, how once we found  
each other it seemed wrong-headed to turn away,  
even when it meant hurting others, and how  
unwomanly that was, and what it could mean  
to never be forgiven.

Questions to consider:

1. Is the speaker's view of desire and love in this collection of poems narrow, or expansive? Consider "What I Want." How does the structure of the poem affirm the content?
2. *Red* frequently juxtaposes desire and grief. What effect does this juxtaposition have on the reader? How is that effect created? Consider the title poem.
3. Most of these poems are firmly rooted in Provincetown, Massachusetts. What effect does knowing – or not knowing – this place have on the reader? Do these poems manage to be universal, while being so specifically sited? Use examples from the poems to support your perspective.

4. How do ideas about desire and love change throughout this collection? Consider poems in the first section and in the last.
5. How do poems like “Fantasia,” “Crickets,” and “Butch/Femme” explore gender roles and queerness?
6. Airplanes, and traveling on planes, are recurring images in this collection. What do you think they symbolize? Point to moments in the collection that support your argument.
7. Why do you think Braverman uses both prose poems and free verse? Why do you think she chooses one style over the other in a particular poem? Provide examples.
8. What is the effect of the poem being one long sentence in “Fall”? How does it affect the pacing of the poem?

Writing prompts:

1. Write a poem about adolescence that is organized around a single day or incident, but also that goes beyond that, as Braverman does in “Crickets.”
2. Write a prose poem, and begin the poem by breaking a word into two pieces, between the title and the first line, as Braverman does in “Day.”
3. Try writing a poem from the point of view of an archetypal figure, as Braverman does in “The Hag.” Some other examples include The Lover, The Magician, The Outlaw, The Jester, The Explorer, The Creator, and The Sage. Explore such figures by doing a little research, and let your findings inform your piece.
4. Write a poem using the title “Benediction” and grounding it, as Braverman does, in everyday details.

Other Perugia books that could pair with this collection:

*Girldom*, Megan Peak

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

*Two Minutes of Light*, Nancy K. Pearson

Areas of study in which to teach this title:

English

Creative Writing/Poetry

Women's Studies

Queer Studies

Ethnic & Gender Studies

American Studies

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