

READING COMPANION

Begin Empty-Handed, by Gail Martin

Sample poem:

Begin Empty-Handed

My liturgy is easy: morning's first bird,
warm rain, the peepers' glee. The east sky

lighting up. But still, there will be a fork
in my day, some junction of blessing

and question. Call the hawk wheeling
over the plowed field abundance,

casting a shadow as he flies. This
is not a simple economy, where loss

is the only bird at the feeder. Consider
one world—white tulips in a crystal jar,

Japanese pearl divers, skirts flaring
in the light then becoming the light.

A girl who confesses the reason she loves
elephants is because they mourn their dead.

We used to have a minister who moved
his hands to contain or punctuate.

On the one hand ... and on the other ...
this scaffolding a formula to say almost

nothing. Yesterday, I found deer bones, gore
gone but some fur clutched to a joint

that looked gnawed off. It takes me a while,
studying its size, the limits of its hingey nature

to determine *knee*. And suddenly I miss
my brother who understands all these things,

as well as the helplessness of it, the torn
full skirt of it, the spilled cold milk of it.

Questions to consider:

1. What were your initial impressions about the narrators of the poems “First Session” and “He Explains”? How do these poems use a stance of emotional distance to tell their stories? Why do you feel Martin chose to frame the poems in this way? Why do you think she chose these narrators?
2. How do the three “Therapist” poems work with the theme of self-disclosure, both on the part of therapy clients as well as the narrator speaking to herself and the reader? Locate instances in these poems where Martin blurs the lines between the experiences of therapist and those of the client.
3. Discuss the metaphor of saving a person who doesn’t want to be saved in the poem “When You Spot a Man Drowning”. Why does Martin choose to write about a man literally drowning rather than writing about emotional pain or struggle? Why does the narrator hold the drowning man at arm’s length?
4. Consider the juxtaposition of the “Marriage” and “Ordinary House” poems. How do these two series of poems inform one another? In what ways are home and marriage both comforting and fraught in this collection?

5. Discuss the lines “I take a long walk and find myself thinking *“hey, this dog doesn’t have a mood /disorder”* from the poem “How It Begins,” and later in the poem the lines “Mark said they were / grooming each other for lice. But I was witness and I could tell it was something / more.” How do these lines bring together the themes of therapy and marriage?
6. Why do you think Martin titles the last poem of the collection “How It Begins”? Examine the circular trajectory of the collection in light of “How It Begins” and the title poem “Begin Empty-Handed”.
7. Reflect on Martin’s use of dark humor throughout the collection. How does the use of humor paired with weighty subject matter affect you as a reader? Point to specific moments of humor to support your ideas.
8. In the poem “Why the Therapist Loves Ironing” Martin writes: “Some days I want to press fingertips over my mouth, / hands over my ears.” In what way does this poem reveal a crisis point for the narrator, the climax of her struggles throughout the collection? Which other poems in the collection lead up to this revelation? How?

Writing prompts:

1. Write a poem disclosing a secret. You can imagine the reader as your listener or someone for whom the secret has relevancy as in the poem “He Explains”.
2. Write a series of letter poems to a real or imagined person making each letter a section, as in the poem “Letters to an Invented Sister”.
3. Write a four-line poem condensing a truth about your home, a house you have lived in, or known as in the poem “Ordinary House I”.
4. Write a prose poem that takes place on a walk, as in the poem “How It Begins”.

Other Perugia books that could pair with this collection:

Two Minutes of Light, by Nancy K. Pearson

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

Starshine Road, by L.I. Henley

Lamb, by Frannie Lindsay

Areas of study in which to teach this title:

Gender Studies

Psychology

Women's Studies

Creative Writing/Poetry

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