

READING COMPANION

Gloss, by Ida Stewart

Sample poem:

Appellation

I ground myself in the sound,

channeling the fabled brave,
his ear to the earth hearing hooves
like heartbeats, then vanishing into the forest

as a note in a chord with nature--
 like music or fog rising
from warm soil.

Where does the self originate,
and do I hear only what I want to hear?
I've got the river just so

in my mind, a fine muddy line
between a real river and a satin ribbon

to worry
between fingers, to tie in my hair.

The river says run off, run off, and gush.
And the houses on the hill, just so, say shush
brick shush--

 windows dusky as apple skin.
Indeterminacy is the ground

I'm hearing, tasting
for meaning or echoes or slant-rhymes,
for root flavor:

the Appalachian appellation.
Redundancies inside redundancies,
the land gives the name.

Hear territory in its pronunciation,

the fine wavering line.
And I'm still talking sound

surrounding
your body before it settles
in the *ear* of heart,
before the heart translates it into some language
like nature, like the steeps steeping.

I've got a ribbon trailing from one hand.
I've got the houses on the hillside
like apples, like pats on a belly, like accents.

An accent is a sound your body lives in,
lives on.

The bird takes a dirt bath
and feels more like herself. The river moves in her banks,
makes herself a river, makes the earth a gorge.

Questions to consider:

1. How does the mountain as an embodied character or being appear throughout this collection? What is the effect of having the mountaintop itself speak, instead of a human speaking *about* the mountaintop?
2. Many of these poems play with language – the sounds of language, meanings, and breakdown of language. Find at least three examples of this type of linguistic play. What effect does such play have on the reader's experience of the poem?

3. Discuss the title of this collection, the poem "Gloss," and the "Glossary:" poems. What connects them and what is different about them?
4. Another way that Stewart plays with language, and complicates language, is through clichés, such as in the poem "The mountaintop refuses his advances." Why do you think Stewart chooses to use clichés?
5. How do Stewart's poems explore connection with a particular place? Do these poems present a single perspective of that place? Consider the mountaintop poems and also "Salamander" and "Appellation."
6. The sounds and meaning of language are present throughout this collection. How does Stewart use sound to invoke a particular place? Look at "Appellation" and "The mountaintop as is:". Consider the opening line of "Appellation": "I ground myself in the sound."
7. How does Stewart explore the relationship of body to place in this collection?
8. Stewart begins the poem "Bless Out" with the line "The trouble is finding language that tells the truth." How does this line relate to themes of place, body, and language/vocabulary in this collection?

Writing prompts:

1. Start a poem with the phrase "the ____ are not," just as Stewart begins "Acre" with "The hay bales are not fists."
2. Try creating your own glossary poem, breaking apart the meanings of words, as Stewart does in "Glossary: Ex- Words" and "Glossary: Co'd Words."
3. Write a poem where you intentionally play with language through the mispronunciation, or slang or colloquial pronunciation, of a word or words, as Stewart does with "heart" and "hear't" in "The mountaintop as Isis, 'She Who Knows How to Make Right Use of the Heart,'".
4. Stewart has many poems in this collection from the perspective of the mountaintop. Choose a place you have a strong connection with, and write from the perspective of that place.

Other Perugia books that could pair with this collection:

Beg No Pardon, by Lynne Thompson

Each Crumbling House, by Melody S. Gee

Kettle Bottom, by Diane Gilliam

Now in Color, by Jackie Balderrama

Areas of study in which to teach this title:

American Studies

Creative Writing/Poetry

U.S. History, especially Appalachian History

Appalachian Literature

Testimonial:

“The collection *Gloss* is a linguistic ballet; it’s a symphony. Stewart’s book is deliberately about speech, puns, rhymes. Her poems are also sometimes serious, sometimes dark, because many of them are about mountaintop coal removal. But Appalachian people have always balanced our tragedies and even our environmental disasters with cultural treasures. The most well known – besides our food! – is our music. And Ida Stewart makes a whole new music, which is just a joy.”

- Susan O’Dell Underwood, *Director of Creative Writing
and Professor of English at Carson-Newman University*

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