

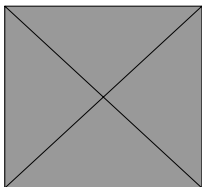
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Reader's Guide

from Jenny Johnson
author of *In Full Velvet*

Author Asks:

1. How does the book's title, *In Full Velvet*, resonate after reading the book? In the title poem, what does the phrase mean? What other connotations might the phrase carry across the book?
2. "Dappled Things" began as my response to "Pied Beauty" by Gerard Manley Hopkins. Read the two poems side by side. In what ways does "Dappled Things" talk back to Hopkins? In what ways does it deviate from Hopkins or initiate a different kind of conversation about the natural world?
3. *In Full Velvet* began as a messy assemblage of disparate notes that seemed to share recurring themes. It is now organized into seven intentional sections. How does the poem accrue meaning across these sections?
4. Three poems in the book are about my great aunts, Peg and Dorothy, often referred to as the "old maids" in my family—Peg my relative by blood and Dorothy, who Peg shared her life with for forty years. My great aunts passed away a few years before I came out, so I never had the chance to speak to them directly about their lives or their relationship. Knowing so little, "Elegy at Twice the Speed of Sound," was particularly difficult to write. At the end of the poem Dorothy speaks. What do you think of the choice I made to end the poem this way? Does it work?
5. When I asked a relative what Dorothy was like, she was described to me as "severe." When writing "Severe," I wanted to better understand this word's connotations, and I wanted to assign the adjective more layers of meaning. Does the word acquire new meanings by the poem's end? If you could redefine a word, what word would you choose and why?
6. In "In the Dream" a bar that feels as expansive as "an open cluster of stars" suddenly turns into a space that feels "like a sweater full of moths eating holes/through wool." How are different spaces charged with emotion in this book? Which images reveal this charge?
7. When writing "Vigil," I was thinking about the power of seeing and being seen by another person. Track the various kinds of gazes in this poem. What role does looking and seeing play in this poem and others in the book, for example, "The Bus Ride" and *In Full Velvet*?

8. I tried to write a book that while being heartbreaking, at times, might also be funny, exuberant, and playful. Did you find certain lines or images in the book particularly memorable for their humor, playfulness, or joy?

9. In the novel *Mrs. Stevens Hears the Mermaids Singing* by May Sarton, the lesbian protagonist declares, “When I said that all poems are love poems I meant that the motor power, the electric current is love of one kind or another.” Are all poems love poems in a sense? And whether or not you think this is the case, which are the least obvious love poems in this collection? And why?

10. As a record collector and a fan of all sorts of music, I love thinking about the relationships between sound and bodies, how for poets our bodies are a kind of instrument that we use to make sounds out of language. Additionally, as a person who identifies as genderqueer, I am curious about the different kinds of music that prohibited bodies make--what kinds of sounds emerge from restraint? What sorts of music does the poem “Aria” make? Where specifically do you hear it?

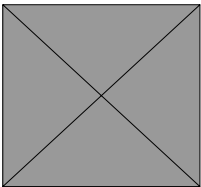
Writing Exercises:

This Is Especially For You

Write a poem for a specific “we” or a plural “you”—the more specific the better. For ideas on how to address a specific collective in a poem, look at “In the Dream,” “Gay Marriage Poem,” or “Aria.” For example, you might address a certain group of friends, a community you are a part of, or a group of people with whom you have shared an experience. Think of this poem as an opportunity to make a certain, intimate readership feel included or maybe even less alone. With this in mind, what imagery could you include or what urgent declaration could you make to let your specific audience know that these words are written for their eyes and ears especially?

Giving Phantoms Form

Write a pantoum for a phantom or a ghost. The phantom could be a person, place, or thing that haunts you. In the case of my poem, “James River,” the speaker’s body and that body’s parts are like phantoms. Once you have written a poem that follows the form of the pantoum and is ringing with echoes, experiment with breaking or subverting the form. “James River” was written and revised in this way. Play around now with moving the poem out of quatrains and into tercets or couplets. Next, experiment with altering repetition in places. Think about how you might use the revision process as a way to allow phantoms to appear, disappear, morph, or transform.



Further Reading:

1. Adrienne Rich, "Twenty-one Love Poems."
2. Marilyn Hacker, *Love, Death, and the Changing of the Seasons*.
3. Audre Lorde, "Uses of the Erotic."
4. Gerard Manley Hopkins, "Pied Beauty" and "The Windhover."
5. Larry Levis, "At the Grave of My Guardian Angel: St Louis Cemetery, New Orleans."
6. Ross Gay, *Bringing the Shovel Down*.
7. *Troubling the Line: Trans and Genderqueer Poetry and Poetics*, edited by TC Tolbert and Trace Peterson.
8. Samuel Ace (published under Linda Smukler), *Normal Sex*.
9. Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History*.
10. José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*.
11. Bruce Bagemihl, *Biological Exuberance: Animal Homosexuality and Natural Diversity*.

