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Reader's Guide

for Nona Caspers
The Fifth Woman

Discussion Questions

1. What does the narrator's time in her apartment mean to her? What do you think she takes away with her? What might she leave behind?
2. What do we know about this narrator's childhood/past? How and where is that information given to us—and inform our experience of the narrator?
3. Some readers find these stories unconventional—in what ways do they break our usual expectations? “The Horse,” for example, may be read as a lyric essay. How did the experimentation inform the narrator's story?
4. How is the story of the dog shadow related to the narrator's experiences with Michelle? Notice the other animals in the book and how they might be relaying the narrator's past and emotional realities.
5. How does loneliness change us? Who is the fifth woman in the alley?
6. What are the undercurrents for you of the title? How does the title illuminate your experience of the book?
7. The narrator is a queer-identified woman who has intimate relationships with other women. How does this fact seem to play a role in her experience?
8. What seems to be left unspoken in “The Ravine” and why?
9. Why does the narrator say “city” and not name San Francisco? Do we know the narrator's name? If so, when do we discover it and does it make a difference? If not, why keep that out of the book, and away from us? What effect does this have on your experience of the book?
10. What do you think will happen with the narrator and Larissa? What does the narrator mean by the last line? “I am so afraid and so awake.”
11. Grief is a universal human response to loss—have you felt/experienced any of the emotions/moods/time warps, etc. that the narrator evokes in the book?
12. How do these stories connect to become one story? How is this book different from other novels? Is it a novel?

13. Within the stories, you move between everyday reality and the surreal/ How does this effect the sense of your own reality? How do you think the surreal is part of everyday life—is it? How do we know the difference in the book between reality and imagination?

Writing Exercises:

Aftermath

Everyday events seem strange in the aftermath of a loss. Write a passage about something ordinary that you do everyday. Then go through and make the narrator pay attention to every odd action—what hadn't you noticed before? Add a metaphorical animal to the passage. Keep adding strange elements until what once was a normal environment is no longer recognizable.

Further Reading:

1. *The Brief History of the Dead*, Kevin Brochmeir
2. *Vapor*, Amanda Filipacchi
3. *Grief is the Thing with Feathers*, Max Porter
4. *Leaving the Atocha Station*, Ben Lerner
5. *The House on Mango Street*, Sandra Cisneros
6. *Autobiography of Red*, Anne Carson
7. *Sula*, Toni Morrison
8. *Complete Poems of Vasko Popa*, trans. Anne Pennington
9. *Cold Mountain Poems: Twenty Poems by Han-shan*, trans. Gary Snyder
10. *Door in the Mountain: New and Collected Poems*, Jean Valentine

