

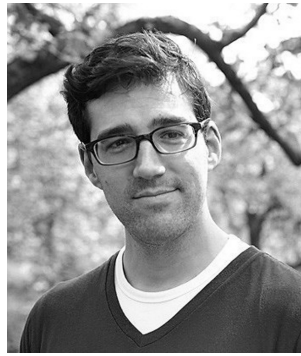
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Reader's Guide

from Michael Homolka
 author of *Antiquity*

Author Asks:

1. In her introduction, Mary Ruefle notes that *Antiquity* leaves us not only with “a sense of spiritual weariness” but also of “wanting to be gladder and more puffed up.” Describe the tone of the collection as a whole. What is found here? Despair? Optimism? Cynicism? Reassurance?
2. Ruefle also writes that the “poems in *Antiquity* very much abandon themselves to language, to the collective poetic endeavor.” Using at least one poem from the collection as a model, delineate precisely what it means for a poem to abandon itself to language. Identify a counterexample from this or another collection in which a poem abandons itself to something other than language (Its content? Its desires? Its politics?) and contrast the two approaches.
3. According to *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, an anachronism is a word, object, or event “mistakenly placed in a time where it does not belong.” According to literarydevices.net, it is “generally . . . considered an unintentional error that is a result of a writer's carelessness and . . . lack of research. At times, however, it is employed in order to produce a special artistic effect.” Though I am not without my moments of carelessness, Reader, I assure you the anachronisms in *Antiquity* are intentional! Identify several examples from the collection and examine their varying impacts on the poems.
4. I chose the Holocaust as the setting for the collection's opening sequence, “Gosh-en.” As a writer in my mid-thirties, I obviously didn't directly experience the events in question. Ludwig Wittgenstein said “Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent.” Theodor Adorno said, “To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric,” though he later admitted he “may have been wrong.” Are these poems in any way irresponsible? Was it necessary that they be written specifically with the Holocaust as their setting?
5. I have heard that the first order of business when writing an ekphrastic (a literary description or commentary on a visual work of art) is to move pretty quickly beyond mere description. In the second section of *Antiquity*, “Endurance” and “Frame” are ekphrastics that each explore a particular painting. Trace the ways in which these two poems both describe and do more than describe.
6. In the poem “Ode on Quote How to Live,” abstract language prevails over concrete imagery. Toward the middle of the poem, we find an italicized block of overtly academic-sounding language. If not with vivid images, how does this poem ultimately persuade us of a world with “no one's heart quite in it”?
7. I addressed the early poems of the second section to various individuals of ancient Greece and Rome. The linguistic register is informal, the diction, at times, debatably crass. Supposing I hadn't relied on today's conversational idioms, what other means might I have used to localize the ancients?
8. Many of the poems in *Antiquity* are staged with a contemporary consciousness wan-

dering a remote era or, conversely, a remote era trying to make sense of the present time. What do these poems gain by way of overlapping time periods? What do they lose?

9. As an exercise, choose a poem from the collection that applies the technique of overlapping time periods and rewrite it so that your own personal experiences replace the historical references. Summarize the similarities and differences between the versions of the poem in terms of their impact on the reader.

10. Using the poems in *Antiquity* as a starting point, evaluate the broader wisdom and limitations of attempting to understand other historical eras in order to understand our own.

Writing Exercises:

(Ir)Reverence

Take out a poem (one by another poet) you have long revered. Write a poem in which you address the revered poem directly. Put it to interrogation. Don't be polite.

Fool Me Once

Think of a place you know well but that has always made you feel uneasy. This will be the setting of your poem. Construct a list of ten words that capture this place. Then write a poem without using any of these words.

Two Tones

Write a poem of no more than twenty lines whose tone and subject are personal. Somewhere in the middle of the poem, include an objective fact—the kind that may be found in an almanac, encyclopedia, news article, or the like.

Further Reading:

1. Louise Glück, *The First Four Books of Poems*
2. Robert Hass, *Praise*
3. Frank Bidart, *In the Western Night*
4. D. M. Thomas, *The White Hotel*
5. Gad Beck, *An Underground Life*
6. Primo Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz*
7. Johannes Nohl, *The Black Death*
8. Eva Cantarella, *Bisexuality in the Ancient World*
9. W. H. Lewis, *The Splendid Century*
10. Cait Murphy, *Crazy '08*

