

# *Far Side of the Earth*

by Tom Sleigh

Houghton Mifflin

## A Reading and Discussion Guide

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### **SUMMARY:**

In *Far Side of the Earth*, Sleigh delivers dense, carefully crafted poems exploring the nature of both the momentary and the lasting, the ephemeral as well as the weighted. Allusions to the most venerable works of literature and art share elbow room with the immediacy of pop-culture images, while settings both harshly exotic and tame in their ordinariness direct our attention to what is extraordinary, essential and universal in human experience.

### **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:**

1. In the table of contents, the poem "Interrogation" appears first and alone, ahead of and distinct from the three sections that make up the body of the book. What about this poem validates its selection as preamble to the rest of the collection?
2. A recurring motif in the poems ("Interrogation," "Newsreel," "On the Yard" etc.) is that of the human form frozen in stone stillness. Compare these images to the moment of stillness described in "To Water." What do each of these poems say about life versus lifelessness? Is there a clear boundary between the two?
3. Discuss the very different approach the poem "Crosswalk" takes to the topic of the boundary between life and lifelessness.
4. Many of the poems feature extreme landscapes and/or extreme situations. Which settings seem most foreign to you, which are familiar and recognizable? How do the poems work to enlarge your understanding of the foreign, of the familiar? (Possible poems to consider: "On the Yard," "Ice Age," "Newsreel," "Bridge," "Spring Morning," "After a Long Illness," the series "New York American Spell, 2001.")
5. The word "abyss" and the image of plunging downward appear frequently, across various poems within the collection (e. g., "The Fissure," "Vessel," "1/Omen" from "New York American Spell, 2001," and "Bridge"). What is the nature of the abyss? Does it vary from poem to poem, and if so, how?

## ACTIVITIES:

1. In an art gallery or art history text, look for portraits in various styles. Compare these visual portraits to the word portraits Sleigh creates in poems like "Bridge," "Nomad," and "Vessel." Notice what a poet can do in portraiture that a visual artist cannot, and vice versa.
2. Take the title of one poem ("Spring Morning," for example) and write a poem or paragraph to accompany that title. Compare to Sleigh's work.
3. Former U. S. Poet Laureate Mark Strand has been quoted as saying, "There's no such thing as a bad poem. There's a poem, or there's not a poem." Play devil's advocate: pick a poem from the collection and call it bad. Defend your answer, as if you hoped to win a debate on the issue. Now argue for the opposite side of the debate.
4. Pick your least favorite poem out of the collection to read aloud. Ideally, read it more than once. Does reading out loud change or deepen your impressions of the poem? How?
5. Trace a literary or artistic allusion in this collection to the earlier work it draws from. Think about whether reading or viewing the original work enhances your experience of the poem. The following examples may be useful for discussion:

Read in Book VII of Plato's *The Republic* to find the original "allegory of the cave" referenced in Sleigh's poem "Day Room," among others. Consider the effectiveness of Sleigh's allusions.

In Janson's *History of Art* or another source, seek out the images of "Michelangelo's slaves." Now re-read "On the Yard," with those images clearly in mind.

In the poem: "Bridge," Sleigh's phrase "The chair she sat in" is identical to the phrase which opens the "Game of Chess" section of T. S. Eliot's "The Waste Land." Find the phrase in each poem and compare the settings. Why would "The Waste Land" be a particularly appropriate poem to reference in this way?

## BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

Tom Sleigh has written four additional collections of poetry (*After One*, *Waking*, *The Chain*, and *The Dreamhouse*) as well as a translation of Euripides' *Herakles* and the play: *Rubber*. He has received grants from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Guggenheim Foundation, among others, and has won various awards and honors for his poetry, including the Poetry Society of America's Shelley Award. It might also interest

readers to know that he was born in Texas in 1953, that his parents really did run a drive-in movie theater (as described in the poem "Newsreel"), that he spent years of his youth in Utah and San Diego, and that he has experienced long illness and lived to write poetry from it. Tom Sleigh's work has appeared in various anthologies; he teaches at Dartmouth College and in New York University's graduate creative writing program. (For further biographical detail, see "Helpful Links" below.)

### **SUGGESTED RESOURCES AND FURTHER READING:**

Ellman, Richard and Robert O'Clair, eds. *The Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry*. New York: W. W. Norton, 1973.

Hamilton, Edith. *Mythology: Timeless Tales of Gods and Heroes*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1942.

Hughes, Ted. *Tales from Ovid*. New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1997.

Janson, H. W. *History of Art: A Survey of the Major Visual Arts from the Dawn of History to the Present Day*. Englewood Cliffs, N. J. : Prentice Hall, 1962.

Keillor, Garrison, ed. *Good Poems*. New York: Penquin Books, 2003.

Perrine, Lawrence, and Thomas R. Arp. *Sound and Sense: An Introduction to Poetry*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1992.

### **HELPFUL LINKS:**

Academy of American Poets: <http://www.poets.org/>

Full Circle Journal: <http://fullcirclejrnl.com/> : This site features a generously long and inspired "Interview with Tom Sleigh" by Allegra Wong.

TV Tome and Guide to the Television Shows You Love: <http://www.tvtome.com>  
A useful site for elucidating poetic allusions to television shows and actors.



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