

Midwest Ritual Burning
by Morgan Harlow

American poet Morgan Harlow's debut collection produces a compelling variant on what is called 'experimental poetry'. In my earlier review of Charles Bernstein's *Attack of the Difficult Poems* I noted that Bernstein defines the term 'difficult poem' as one with abstruse vocabulary and syntax, hard to appreciate on first readings, yet affecting the reader's imagination – all of which makes "some readers feel stupid." Not so this collection. Although many of Harlow's poems do disrupt syntax, play with the geography of the poem on the page, and privilege sound over sense, the muscular precision of the words bears down with chilling impact on the reader. She respects her audience. Here is the title poem in its entirety:

Davy and Min are
burning hooves and horns
raked into a pile near the drive going up to the barn.
Davy scatters a little of the ash rich in calcium
to the chickens and Min tips a quarter turn of the shovel
onto the ground beneath
a belated daffodil
gotten through the brush
where the last sticks of firewood
left over from the winter
splinter and curl
in the light of the sun.

At first glance it's a bit of rural lyric, an American Gothic couple fertilizing their patch. But four words, burning hooves and horns, suddenly transport the reader into a parallel Homeric universe, behemoths roasting on the beach, burnt offerings to the gods, ritual. Note moreover the opposition of these beasts to a little ash, a hesitant quarter turn of the shovel, the lost daffodil, and remnants of tinder.

Following Emily Dickinson's directive to "Tell all the Truth but tell it slant --/ Success in Circuit lies," Man Effigy Burial Mound (a national monument in Iowa) tells of a couple driving across one of the large 12,000 year-old American Indian mounds, the woman addressed by a brusque male voice ("I didn't see until you pointed it out to me....Cut through the gut is what you said"). But they are having an affair ("Your wife stayed home.... When we are out, your wife's at home"); one with a destructive ending shown by two perfect metaphors: "She contemplates the Ice Age and the crumbling glacial loam."

Four of Harlow's poems draw on four paintings by Joan Miró. One of the early surrealist painters, Miró soon developed a unique experimental style of fantastic but discrete arrangements of colours and shapes (called 'pictorial signs' by art critics). Harlow reflects on his work in *Poem Beseeching an End to Social Darwinism, a Meditation on Painting, 1933*, by Joan Miró. The poem counterfactually gives a brief straightforward prose-speech pleading for human comity: "We must seek to understand, and not compete against, each other....Do not engage in life as though it were a contest..." Is she being ironic? I think not: the painting shows bright, furious reds, black and white forms, with two humanoid shapes opposing one another, and a bemused man-in-the-crescent moon looking down on the scene. Harlow is unafraid of feeling or political gesture. Neither was Miró: his *Man and Woman in Front of a Pile of Excrement, 1935* – lurid, sexual – is said to be a foreboding of the coming Spanish Civil War. Harlow uses the work to plea again for civilized discourse instead of violence:

That which is elemental, the color red, amoebas, nakedness,
is most alien to us. We must clothe it as best we can through
language, art and law. To greet it plain is to risk stepping off
the cliff into darkness.

Like Miró, Harlow achieves her best work with elements: discrete, distinct and parsimonious; a muscular eccentricity. There is a risk to writing in fragments – Harlow’s longest poem, *Elegy to a Higher Love*, is made of fourteen such; but to judge the work this way would be like focusing on just one portion of an abstract painting instead of standing back to see the whole.

I can see how the painter would illustrate Harlow’s *Park Statue*:

If the spirit of their fallen Colonel be embodied in this bronze,
must not the infantry troops he watched over be these flowers,
each of them keen to the whip and snap of the flag on this
perfect summer’s day?

Summer days turn into autumn, then winter, yet the fragile flowers still give obeisance to the obtuse statue. Note that there are no clichéd pigeons about.

Harlow’s *ars poetica* in *The New* stands as a plea for poetry in human life:

“...was poetry ever not real/ distinct from the world and from love? Or/ / was it always always lived,/ with a sigh and a breath/ and a cry?” Harlow affirms ‘always’ in this impressive first collection.

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