

THE SRPR REVIEW ESSAY:
DRESSED BY FIRE

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Burning of the Three Fires
Jeanne Marie Beaumont
BOA Editions Ltd., 2010
88 pages; paperback, \$16.00

Amnesiac
Duriel E. Harris
The Sheep Meadow Press, 2010
90 pages; paperback, \$12.95

Like Charlotte Perkins Gilman in “The Yellow Wallpaper,” Jeanne Marie Beaumont and Duriel E. Harris interrogate the nature of oppression and the internalization of trauma by re-appropriating numerous cultural artifacts—both discursive and material—through which these experiences are often inscribed and normalized. Through a complex identification with her “sad mother,” for instance, Beaumont learned to disguise the powerful intellect of her voice, a voice she inherited from her father who used “talk” as a professional salesman, drawing people in with his charm and gift for gab. Like Plath and even Dickinson, the speaker in *Burning of the Three Fires* realizes that sexual difference is querulous and non-compromising; she must alter herself in order to achieve linguistic parity with the imperial father figure who colonized her as he did her mother and sister. The triumph of Beaumont’s book is in mastering the master, just as it is in Harris’s *Amnesiac*, as she, too, transgresses the limitations of a racist and essentialist discourse and excoriates the perpetrators who have tried to keep her oppressed.

The speakers in *Amnesiac* reveal early traumatic memories (which I will more fully explicate later) seemingly too dangerous for consciousness to bear. Therefore they are torn from language, revealing the catalytic event to be iconic, partial, unspeakable, and dissociated

from the self-as-speaker. Harris's series of "self portraits" ("self portrait: fractal," "self portrait in desire," "self portrait as negro girl") is, then, as much an act of ritual embrace as it is of refusal: the speaker is comprised of not one, but all of these things. Transformation for Harris is dramatized not via a quest for coherence but through an impassioned performance of fragmentation. In this way, as in Ellison's *Invisible Man* or Derek Walcott's "The Divided Child," the speaker of Harris's poems is always double-edged in her assumptions about self-identity; she sees herself through what is missing rather than what is not. Thus, she is an amnesiac looking for the signs, clues, or hints that might help her to recall who she is through the eyes of the white culture that has contributed to her aphasia.

Beaumont, on the other hand, presents a poem as a coherent object of inference, embroidered with visual puns, yet she is equally adept at inferring painful aspects of psychic experience through the manipulation of the poem's surface, as in her masterpiece, "Dressing Table, 1963." Here, Beaumont forms the poem into the shape of a dressing table through the accessories that belong there—not just a catalog of cosmetic items, but items that have intentionality: "curlers of docility and demure tendencies," "a powder / puff of inflammatory rhetoric," a "pin cushion of perpetual devotions" (20). These are a woman's sundries not only for dressing but also for speech—particularly the speech of poetry, wherein each object of thought must be "dressed" in order to perform as an aesthetic part (or protest) of the whole.

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In his "Foreword" to the 1966 edition of Sylvia Plath's *Ariel*, Robert Lowell describes the book as "almost pure motion," explaining that "[Plath] burns to be on the move, a walk, a ride, a journey, the flight of the queen bee. She is driven forward by the pounding pistons of her heart."¹ Some forty years later, *Burning of the Three Fires* presents many of the same qualities that Lowell identifies. Beaumont's poems chart a fierce trajectory of motion as well as stasis. They provide an equally torpid examination of the female body, ultimately transforming it into a statue or a relic (often represented by the recurring doll,

1. Robert Lowell. *Introduction to Ariel* (Harper and Row, 1966), vii.