

The Gamekeeper: Selected Poems 1976--2011

Michael Harris

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Harris's poems zero in on poignant moments with vibrant attention to detail.

In his poem "Killing the Beast," Michael Harris writes, "I wanted to slow it all down enough to look at." That urge to look closely, to relate every detail of a single, fully realized moment, informs the poems in this collection, as well as some of the paintings that inspired them—at least, according to Harris. Reminiscent of Robert Frost's work in their measured lines and formal strength, the collection's poems display an invigorating use of similes and a deft understanding of long, narrative styles.

The volume brings together selections from Harris's previous five books. The strongest poems arguably come in the first three volumes, which are metrically tight and lit with powerful, visceral images. Of particular power is a long, sectioned poem about the death of the poet's brother. It moves between childhood and adulthood, memories of living and memories of death, with details such as of the brother's stutter: "the long consistent unstoppable sibilants / esses upon esses." The poem's language enacts the painful interim before the brother finally makes his exclamation. Harris zeros in on such moments with vibrant attention to detail.

In other poems, nature, and humankind's interaction with it, centers lines. It is their lyrical, lilting language that makes these poems worth engaging, such as around the last apples of fall, when "October's // sweet rot ciders the air." Unexpected but apt word choices spark the work.

The later work shows more humor and more interest in the greater world. A series of ekphrastic poems based on famous paintings are included alongside persona poems from a wide variety of speakers. These poems formally play with rhymes and inherited forms, if they lack the same concentrated power of the early work. *The Gamekeeper* rewards those who value both attentive technical poetry and luxurious images.

CAMILLE-YVETTE WELSCH (August 22, 2018)

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