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From Portuguese bull jumpers to an ancient Minoan wall fresco

By JoANN BALINGIT
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In Lisbon, Portugal, I went to a *corrida de touros*, a bullfight. My friends assured me the Portuguese version was not violent, unlike the Spanish and Mexican bullfights where a shining matador finally slays the creature with his sword.

Even so, the Portuguese contest begins with some bloodshed. *Cavaleiros* in 18th-century spangles burst into the arena riding highly-trained Lusitanians. The horses tap dance around the bull as the rider pricks its withers with lances. Next *bandarilheiros* tease the angry animal dangerously close with capes. But it's the "bull jumpers" everyone waits for.

The *forcados*, eight young men in silly-looking green hats, arrange themselves single file. Hands on hips, their leader taunts the bull face-on. At just the right moment, he shuffles backward and leaps onto the charging bull's head, hips planted between horns (we hope) for the *pega de cara* (face catch).

He binds his arms around the bull's horns and throat. His teammates pile onto the head. The last forcado, with the most seniority, pulls the tail and digs in his heels. They immobilize the bull. The fight is over.

A small herd of steers is ushered in. Surrounded by its own kind, the becalmed bull trots out of the arena to the soothing chime of cowbells.

Scholars say bull jumping came to Portugal from Crete's ancient Minoan civilization, by way of Roman conquerors. The famous wall frescos in the excavated palace at Knossos on the island of Crete depict scenes of ritual bull jumping.

Scholars also insist, as Abby Millager points out in this week's poem, that Minoan bull jumpers were strictly male. Do we have to take their word for it?

Whether from memory, observation, or experience, poems take root in the imagination. Sometimes poems grow from two imaginations -- as when a poet responds to a work of art.

This week's poem, "SCHOLARS INSIST," is an "ekphrastic" poem, a poem inspired by a painting, sculpture, woodcarving, drawing, dance -- all art offers opportunities for imaginations to get together.

Reading Millager's poem, I imagine *forcadas* in the Portuguese rings today.

Abby Millager holds an M.F.A. from Bennington Writers Seminars and an M.D. from the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center. A 2008 recipient of the Delaware Division of the Art's

fellowship in poetry, she reads her poems today at 4 p.m. at the Deer Park in Newark. "Scholars Insist" previously appeared in *Seattle Review*.

SCHOLARS INSIST

the creature on the bull is a boy, say long hair was the style back then. I say
her breasts face the back of the fresco, she's fourteen

and she's been practicing. You don't just go grabbing bulls by horns. Not
without working up to it, Saturdays in the pasture,

dead tree, spiny prongs, rough forks. Skinning your hands, you somersault
hard, circle the trunk's flaking under-belly, shear off

musky rivers of bark. Then you graduate: some uncle's goat, maybe a cow
for the size of it, but after that mostly

nobody goes for the bull. Oh sure—they've all seen it done, wiry men
in traveling shows. But this girl's different.

She goes with her friends, sees the bull's body bowed, horns, tail pricked
like a scorpion's sting. A glorious breeze

comes over. She sprints for the head, flips up light. The beast, startled
or enchanted—hard to say which—

takes off. As the girl's arms scissor his flanks, her neck and body arch up
and back. Wispy legs, feet float—trail—

like ostrich plumes, barely fluttering shy of that barbarous tail.

Abby Millager