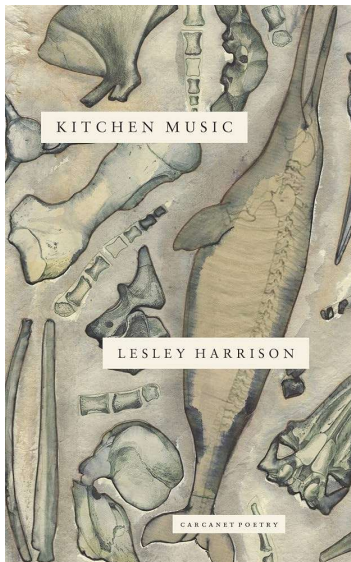


'Kitchen Music', by Lesley Harrison

Review by Richie McCaffery



An increasing number of poets think that the job of a poet is to do anything but write poems - it's about cultivating and raising an image, selling a brand, getting into regular stramashes on social media. It's becoming more uncommon to find poets who simply get on with the private and at times unrewarding task of writing poems, often to little fanfare. Lesley Harrison has pursued her art with a quiet yet steely determination - rather like the old salty Victorian whalers after their cetaceous quarry she recounts in a number of poems in this, Harrison's sixth collection. The merit in Harrison's understated approach is evident here, since this is her first collection with the major UK press Carcanet, published with a parallel US edition by New Directions.

Harrison has explained that the title of the collection, *Kitchen Music*, originates from Appalachian fiddle music where tunes would be played and added to down family or community lines, never belonging to one person, always anonymous and aural. The title poem is a phenomenological celebration of being a living observer in the present, being able to walk around and add lines to the song. The first person 'I' is absent from much of Harrison's writing and there is a feeling, like the Appalachian bluegrass players, that the poet is tapping into, and adding to, an ancient collective strain. This goes some way to explaining Harrison's ekphrastic

and intertextual interests in these poems , especially in the epigraph from assemblagist artist Joseph Cornell that 'collage = REALITY'. The story or fable is never completed and instead exists in a state of perpetual flux within folk memory, forever returning and being rewritten or retold, such as the myth of the missing girl, found on the island of 'Hether Blether'. Within this folktale is also the story of those lost at sea or those who emigrated, never to be seen again:

*a grief, held in abeyance:
the whole world
shapeless*

*in
paper white
mid-morning silence,*

*the old man
out beyond loss or mourning
locked in brightness*

In this deeply pelagic and archipelagic book, the compass is always pointing North, always on the edge of some vast, cold terra incognita that Harrison is always at pains to capture in words that are often as rare and unfamiliar as the place they set out to describe, words that appear like ambergris on the beach:

*o cathedral:
like an aurora,
downsweeping
kindling the dark
with antiphons*

*the slow turn
of bulks in darkness*

(from 'C-E-T-A-C-E-A')

Though Harrison is clearly attuned to the ecological and environmental relevance of her work, particularly in relation of aquatic life, she is also keen to stress that

the motif of the whale is not used to symbolise anything deeper than the enigmatic whale itself, that 'their literal truth is enough to amaze'. In the found poem 'Old Whaling Days', Harrison points out that even with a dose of historical relativism, it is difficult by modern standards to read references made by whalers who always gendered their prize female, the way women have historically been both revered and reviled, the 'whore in a nunnery' ('Hymnal'):

*I saw her under water
she was beautifully distinct, and in slow motion
she lightly touched the vessel.
the concussion made her tremble*

While Harrison's language is often pellucid and lapidary, her command and control of the 'white space' of both the page and silence is worthy of W. S. Graham who once remonstrated with his publisher, Charles Monteith, that the latter should remove a little typographical symbol from the white space between the title and the body of the poem. Graham's stance was that the white of the page was an integral part of the poem and part of the poet's territory. The effect here is that the poems are given space to breathe and the restraint of the poems themselves means they don't feel like they are all clamouring for your immediate attention. More than this, however, is the feeling that the white space is an uncharted pre-discursive realm from which the poet must wrestle anything of meaning, any new coinage, 'tacet' being a calculated silence in a musical arrangement:

[displacement]

*tacet:
a held silence,
clear as porcelain;
a listening around*

*text interwoven
partly softly
as words hold the sound of all other words*

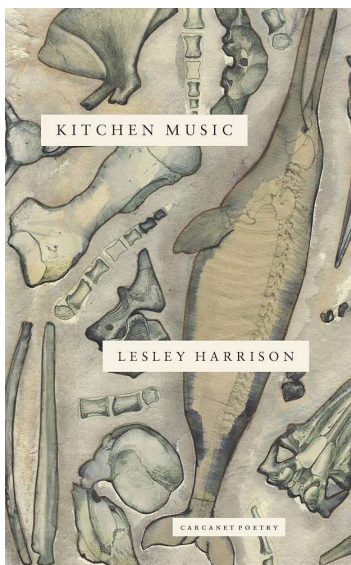
*out at the edge of earshot,
as eardrums respond to the sound of dreams.*

light the candle, he said.

(from 'Convergence')

In 'Weather Reports You' we are told that 'There is no weather in dreams. In dreams we move like fish in / water, without resistance. When we wake up, we are sluggish.' It could be argued that poems are an oneiric land we are taken to where words give the illusion of real things happening, but rather like Auden's ambiguous line 'poetry makes nothing happen', they don't have any traction or influence in the 'real' world. But in Harrison's poems we often emerge from the depths feeling exhilarated, glad to be alive and in little doubt about the tangible worth of a poetry that argues that life is where art and communication are allowed to flourish and endure, no matter how remote their origins or destination.

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