

**In My Book: "Flowers Amid the Ruins" (*Concord Monitor*, December 20, 2009)
 Mike Pride, former Editor of *Concord Monitor*, reviews *Out of Silence*
 by Pamela Harrison (David Robert Books)**

What I look for in poetry may not be what you look for in poetry. I want the poet to tell me a story. Because the form requires the poet to keep the story short. I want the words to be precise. The poet should help me see by using concrete images. Sound is important. Even while reading a poem silently, I want to hear its music. Above all, I expect genuine feeling in a poem. While I understand that poets lie for the sake of their art, a poem must be honest at the core, truth enhancing the beauty of it.

Your ear may be different from mine, your standards more or less stringent than mine, but when I encounter the work of a poet unfamiliar to me, these are the things I seek. Rarely do I find them in such pleasing abundance as I did in *Out of Silence*, Pamela Harrison's new book.

Harrison is a former prep-school English teacher who teaches creative writing at Dartmouth College. She lives in Norwich, but grew up in Oklahoma. *Out of Silence* is her third book of poems. Because of the personal story at its heart, it is a book she has been writing for most of her life.

Out of Silence centers on a common human failing. Harrison's father, who is a doctor, cheats on her mother, and the mother catches him in the act. In "His Grand Jeté," whose title refers to the ballet leap in which the dancer throws himself into the air and extends his legs in a split, the poet imagines her father's futile longing to undo his wrong. Here is the poem in full:

As he pumped Mother's stomach
 and slapped her cheeks,
 perhaps our father felt caught,

like Cartier-Bresson's man,
 in his "defining moment"—
 legs splayed in *grand jeté*

as he leapt
 into a vacancy
 through which he was fated to fall,

crashing messily back to earth,
 breaking through the mirror
 of our family's happy myth

and taking us all with him—unless
 his skill could freeze the moment
 magically in air.

Too shameful to name,
 that day's events,

he must have hoped,
 might fade in time
 into vague unknowing. Into not being.
 Into never having been.

This poem has the rhythm and pace to match its wonderful metaphor. One sentence winds through five stanzas with devastating “f” and “m” words clustering toward toward the end—*fated, fall, freeze, messily, mirror, myth, moment, magically*. Then the daring dancer crashes to earth in the staccato sentence fragments at the end. There will be no magical midair freezing of the moment.

The couple stays together, but their estrangement rules the home. The mother cannot forgive.

She stared like lashless eyes,
 a woman who tried too late
 to light the furnace of her freezing house.

A poet who delves into her parents’ lives must beware of seeing them only as reflections of her needs and feelings. Harrison brings her silent mother to life in many ways, including a deathbed confession that she spent too much time keeping house.

She sped from chore to chore, making our ship
 so trim it tightened like a vise.

The father’s life is equally vivid. For years he strives in vain to turn the dry crust of Oklahoma to fertile topsoil. He makes house calls at night, at least once bringing his daughter along.

I watched the back of his shadowy form fade
 across a treeless yard to an unlit porch.
 Long moments of nothing. Then, sudden yellow

 crack framing him briefly
 before he stepped inside, the door closed,
 and absence lapped on every side.

There is in Harrison’s poems a hint of Robert Frost. She writes in what she calls “a roughly iambic free verse”—rougher than Frost’s but with a bow to traditional form.

In one poem she pays homage to Frost’s idea of the sound of sense. This is the notion that even through walls or at a distance, a listener can take the meaning of a sentence or expression from the tone and modulation of the speaker’s voice. Sitting on the stairs one

night listening to her parents argue, the young girl cannot make out the words but feels the anger.

In the long run, this is not enough. Brought up in a house where silence was deadening, Harrison needed more than the muffled sounds of a kitchen argument. She writes movingly of how living in a Baltic country where she did not understand the language transformed her love of words into an essential need for them.

When words deserted me,
 whole days escaped in air.
 Beside myself on lonely walks, I was flotsam
 drifting across department stores' glass windows,
 shreds of color on the harbor's restless water.

For Harrison, silence reduces body and soul to weightless reflections, fleeting and fragmented. Having seen her mother choose silence, she rejects it.

One obvious use of words is to rescue the past. As an adult, you can say what you only observed as a child. In "Artesian," Harrison describes the journey from the surface to the depths of things:

When you are a child, every day plays
 like a stream over a bed of pebbles.
 All you can see is liquid and light,
 your future a dream of hazy waiting.

In time, you travel back along a cut bank,
 past trees whose runneled trunks stand
 like sculpted pillars of a vault.
 High crowns darken the gloom.

At each step, dust motes lift in shafts of ambered light,
 hushing your approach to the muscular rush
 that fountains up: countless icy gallons
 welling from the world's hidden heart.

In her descent into this hidden heart, Harrison's quest is not to redeem the past but to name its emotions and shape its meaning. And this she does.

The poems in *Out of Silence* are flowers amid the ruins, and lovely ones indeed.

(Mike Pride's most recent book, *Our War: Days and Events in the Fight for the Union* was published in 2012.)
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