

“Generations Deep: The Poetry of Pamela Harrison”
Review by Beth Kanell (kingdombks.blogspot.com.) March 30, 2010:

National Poetry Month is April—at least, as defined by libraries and many schools. And of course, April now holds the shiver of T. S. Eliot’s words: “April is the cruelest month, breeding/ Lilacs out of the dead land.” I enjoy the blossoming of poetry in this season, and I’ll add some poetry reviews over the next few weeks, among the mysteries. There are links between the genres, and Pamela Harrison illustrates this in her volume *OUT OF SILENCE*, which probes the mystery of her parents’ dark love story. It could have been a dark thriller of sorts—instead, as a volume of poems, it’s an excavation, a baring of souls.

Harrison spent some thirty years in this labor, and as the volume opens, she is present as an adult recalling her childhood, and the mother who modeled beauty and glamor for her. Moments sparkle in crystal, rise like swelling bubbles glinting in beams of light, in “Little Curls of Steam”:

Mother bathed with practiced care,
pushing back the cuticle on each finger and toe,
freeing the pale moons risen there.
Her head bent to the work like prayer.

After all these years—still, the sound of water falling,
fragrance of Ivory soap, the unembarrassed grooming
of a woman who never flinched in her nakedness,
who lived in her deepest heart, sequestered.

But soon Harrison lets go of this silken strand and allows her parents to stand without her, in their own youth—falling in love in the post-Depression years when wealth and security were more than a dream; they were a necessary goal, an insistence beating in the blood.

But there was darkness hidden in the romantic courtship and marriage, and it twisted the events that followed. Harrison writes in “Physician, Heal” of the pain her father endured from that precious wife’s despairing actions: “Reckon the terrible, on-going, inescapable/ shame of a doctor who could not heal/ his marriage or his wife.” Soon the small child that was Pamela Harrison begins to see darkness outlined and to realize that she “knows” about the despair and anger between her parents.

Delicately, she paints the pain of knowing that her mother loves her brother best. She lays hints of the depression and mania that steal her mother’s ability to parent. She smooths, irons, and hangs across the line the fabric of secrets, the forced feeding, the illnesses and losses. Moving quietly among forms, Harrison probes the gap like a tongue drawn always to the missing tooth, the tender gum, the absence. I like especially a short, almost fragmentary poem called “What the Wind Is,” and then the rustle of the poems that follow, always calling back and forth from past disaster to present grief: “Final Trial,” “Fixity,” “My Father’s Well,” “Climbing Sorrow.”

The test of this sequence of poems becomes whether Harrison can rescue herself from these shadows, and even more so, whether she can prevent them from darkening the lives to come: her own daughter, most vitally. From intense images of the small and significant gestures of the people in her life, she sometimes steps into a cool, deliberate focus on life as art that lifts these visions further, as in “No Mean Trick”:

A pear’s green peel exactly fits its own flesh.
And we must fit our words to the world—or we are mad.

And when the collection concludes, we know something of the sorrow and loveliness of spring, and of this self-led exodus from darkness into blossoming.

Harrison's book came out last summer [June 2009 from David Robert Books, Cincinnati]...Some of the poems are available in their entirety at the publisher site. I recommend OUT OF SILENCE as a salute to the new season.