



House Music

Ellen Kaufman

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Images of the mother and common settings are turned dreamlike in this calming poetry collection.

This collection is quiet, attentive, and rhythmic. Ellen Kaufman's poems look closely at the diurnal—laundry, vacation, gardens, a hair salon—and through image and tone makes those seemingly familiar spheres strange and haunting.

Although this is Kaufman's first collection, her work has appeared in a number of journals, including *Beloit Poetry Journal*, the *New Yorker*, *Poetry Northwest*, *Shenandoah*, and *Tar River Poetry*. She is the recipient of the 2012 Southwest Poetry Review's Morton Marr Poetry Prize and is a 2009 MacDowell fellow. A graduate of Columbia for both her MFA and MSLS, Kaufman brings a fine command of prosody to her poetry. Attentive to both sound and image, the poet utilizes inherited forms to bring order to her vision, as in her villanelle "A Flemish Still Life," where the circular motion of the form reinforces the and necessity of a pleased patron.

The book's opening poem introduces the reader to Kaufman's style and themes. In "Waves," Kaufman enters the strange sea of the beauty salon where "Permanent should be forever, / hair yielding to desire. // And desire should be this simple, / reshaped with chemicals and water, // smoothed by heated currents."

In poems more overtly biographical, Kaufman reshapes the creation of the writer, taking it from the hallowed halls of education and literary kin and returning to her own story of her mother's steaming iron. She writes in "Opus" of watching her mother work for years:

*"And then
you'd have to leave, trusting in
the steamy certainty of that job
while her leaden arm continued to
press a dwindling pile of old snow
against the silver surface of the board.
You'd have to know something
about the marriage of pride and scorn,
of scorch and starch, of perfection
and negation. And then
you'd have to forget.*

The figure of the mother moves in and out of the text, her life serving as counterpoint to the milestones in the author's life.

Kaufman's ideas are compelling and unexpected. In "These Lines Are Beams of Light," the poet imagines the strange life of disembodied words, no longer tied to paper—"they appear and disappear without pasts / or futures, barely remembering those who // release them into the ether, like smoke."

For readers eager for an ordered calm that nonetheless engages the emotions, *House Music* is a fine companion, quiet and measured.

CAMILLE-YVETTE WELSCH (Spring 2014)

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