

Jacob Anthony Ramírez, *Kitchen Boombox*
(ignitionpress, 2022)

Editor's Note by Claire Cox



How does poetry work? In language, in image, in form and expression, in sound, in content, in externalising interior thoughts and feelings, or as a feast for the senses? Often poetry can favour one or more of these aspects over the others. *Kitchen Boombox* noticeably draws on all these elements to generate a force field of vitality, deeply informed by culture, family, music and vision.

Language here is inflected with absence. In the opening poem 'Z', the speaker is pressed by unwelcome cultural stereotyping to reveal that he doesn't speak the Spanish that his surname might suggest. His father sought to break that cultural link, though echoes of his grandmother's voice and her half-understood Spanish words still linger in memory. The speaker's unchosen affiliations are symbolised by his waiting Shakespeare. The canonical realm of literature in English is both an opportunity and an emblem of linguistic disenfranchisement; the hinterland of language is also the periphery of given, and self-determined, cultural identity.

With this opening, the language of the pamphlet is already charged. Its words go beyond being superficial signifiers to take on deeply personal meaning. Words are messengers for the preoccupations of the speaker, which reach beyond language to ignite images. Words denoting colour are recurrent: 'yellows of daffodil, medallion, and urine' (Do Not Resuscitate), and 'pink paper' ('Maestro Milo & His Homemade Wine'). They are used synaesthetically to create startlingly fresh visuals: 'blue backyard' ('La Bruja Blanca / The White Witch'), 'purple silence' ('The Apple Tree'), 'the indigo / plains' ('A Sensitive Son'). Colour is also implied: the father in his 'silk Dashikis' ('Do Not Resuscitate'), the car with its 'shatter of paint' (1983 Oldsmobile), and the 'light through medieval glass' ('Borders of Love'). These words conjure strongly visual, and often culturally specific, images.

High art, too, in terms of specific painters makes an appearance with references including Seurat's *A Sunday on La Grand Jatte* ('Last Barbecue in America') and Frida Kahlo's works ('Frida's Body'). These references are juxtaposed in a way within the poems that raises questions about cultural heritage, entitlement, and gender – Frida's body, though intimately linked with her environment and her art, is dissected, leaving only 'her ribs / roaring beneath the heavens'. This approach reflects the spirit of Kahlo's own representation (and anatomisation) of her body through her work and so goes beyond simple notions of the male gaze.

Even the poems' titles contribute to a highly visual sensibility, notably 'The Black Dove / Cucurrucucú Paloma' and 'La Bruja Blanca / The White Witch'. But here the English / Spanish // Spanish / English translations work to problematise and politicise expressions of visual and linguistic identity. Nothing here is, or can ever be, straightforwardly black or white.

Visual complexity is also deployed across the page in terms of form. The layout of 'Things Will Never Be the Same Again' seeks to mimic the four spaces of sheet music. The inclusion of prose poems creates a visual solidity in terms of a block, as in 'Maestro Milo & His Homemade Wine' and more loosely in 'Borders of Love'. The pamphlet also contains deft variations on the conventionally square, 14-line sonnet. This sonnet form is easily recognisable in 'Tamales' but becomes increasingly more exploded and extemporised in, for example, 'If You Find Me Dead ~~In California~~' and 'Miles Davis Dies in 35 Days'. Here the form becomes almost vestigial – an idea of a sonnet, or a sonnet liberated through virtuoso bravado, akin to a jazz solo, full of joy, and the playfulness of possibility.

The visual, then, is closely intertwined with another major theme of the pamphlet, that of music and sound. Music, as closely associated with the speaker's father, permeates the pamphlet even from the opening epigraph by Stevie Wonder. The subsequent poems are packed with musical references including song titles, chords, instruments, and the names of bands and musicians. The specificity of these references creates a soundtrack of an individual life, of a family, its community and its neighbourhood. The title *Kitchen Boombox* emphasises the centrality of music to the lived experience contained within these poems; domesticity's shared heartbeat and pulse.

Music here is also elegiac. In its traces are the lives of other people, old jazz musicians, the speaker's father; their residual presences unshakable and ingrained in the physical surroundings, in the silent veranda ('The Lives of Jazz Fathers') and in the pounding

of the car dash ('Things Will Never be the Same Again').

Sound is also verbal, circling back to the importance of language. The centrality of the spoken word is again alluded to here: the problematic Spanish, the bilingual family conversations, their phrasing and idiom, the betrayal of the tongue in terms of belonging, or not, to the shifting scenarios conjured in these poems. *The wind is the wail of the living*, says the grandfather in 'The Black Dove / Cucurrucucú Paloma'. The speaker's struggle to find his own voice culminates in the call 'a heart needs a tongue' ('Borders of Love'), which awaits a response. This waiting, this caesura of the heart, reminds us of the call extended in a previous poem, 'Miles Davis Dies in 35 Days', to the absent, orbiting father and the lonely wait, 'like ground control', for an answer that never comes.

Like the mourning but hungry grandfather in 'The Black Dove / Cucurrucucú Paloma', food in these poems feeds more than the stomach. The sensory invitation to taste pervades these poems in multiple ways: food as a shared family task ('Tamales'), as woman's work ('Do Not Resuscitate'), as magical ingredient ('La Bruja Blanca / The White Witch' and the wine in 'Maestro Milo & His Homemade Wine'). It is also a catalyst for encounters ('Shopping'), and an indictment of a country: 'What does hunger smell like in America? // Who craves in a country full of freedom?' ('Last Barbeque in America'). Food is more than something that satiates, more than the solace to be found in the familiarity of family cuisine: the chillies, the masa, the tamales, the cilantro, the salsa fresca; it is a cipher for the profoundest of intangibles: belonging, identity, faith, grief, shame, anger, lust, regret, acceptance and hard-won love.

Through speaking to, and of, the senses *Kitchen Boombox* achieves an extraordinary balance between the visceral and the exquisite. The last poem 'Shopping', is an invitation to unwrap the world of the poet's experiences, in all its complexity and uncertainty. In these poems of unshirking vitality we can begin to see how poetry works.