

SMALL HOUSE PAMPHLET SERIES

NUMBER 2 • SEPTEMBER 2020

SMALL HOUSE READING SERIES hosted our first reading in the fall of 2016, just before the 2016 election, in Greenville, South Carolina. That fall ushered in a sense of darkness and fear that had long lurked just beneath the surface; for the next three years, until spring of 2019, we were grateful for the words shared by our readers—who came from far and wide to share their work—and for the fellowship the readings brought about.

In early in the spring of 2020, we found ourselves missing the voices of our friends and wondering what we could do to help our communities. Thinking primarily of COVID-19-related relief efforts, we asked our readers to share a poem—not necessarily of the moment, just a poem—as well as a community organization, and we published our first pamphlet in May 2020.

The months following the release of our first pamphlet edition have been marked by protests against longstanding racism, police brutality, and oppression of Black communities, by wildfires and hurricanes, by the continuation of the pandemic. We know that efforts to unbuild and rebuild are constant and ongoing. We are heartened to see writers writing—our creative work can't stop—and thinking about the material action they can take to redistribute resources. There is a lot of work to be done.

If you're reading this now, and if you can, we invite you to contribute to any of the following organizations suggested by our poets. Links to these organizations can also be found at the Small House website, www.smallhousepoetry.com

We look forward to the next time we can all come together safely in our small house, or anywhere else.

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CALIFORNIA:

Alameda Food Bank: <http://www.alamedafoodbank.org>

COLORADO:

Colorado Freedom Fund: <http://www.blackbailout.org/>

Front Range Mutual Aid: <https://frman.org/>

KENTUCKY:

Feed the West: <https://change-today.org/feedthewest/>

MICHIGAN:

Metro Detroit COVID-19 Mutual Aid fund: <https://chuffed.org/project/detroitlives>

NEW YORK:

Harlem United: <https://www.harlemunited.org/donate/>

SOUTH CAROLINA:

GirlUp GVL: <https://girlupgvl.org/donate/>

TEXAS:

Houston Rental Assistance Support: <https://www.bakerripley.org/rental-assistance-support>

VIRGINIA:

Shelter for Help in Emergency: <https://www.shelterforhelpinemergency.org/get-involved/donate>

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UNTITLED [LOVE]

SOMMER BROWNING

A body walking from a lake
Wants to never have been pushed in.

A star wants only a little something:
A donut
A beautiful story.

It never ceases to amaze me
That at the end of your neck

Is a drill, a fountain, the tragedy
Of photography.

I told you the best word is yes
And you said, no, elbow.

Tiny failure.
Band-Aid in the pool.

THE B-SIDES OF THE *GOLDEN RECORDS*, TRACK ONE: "THE CANARY FLIES TOWARD THE MINE"

SUMITA CHAKRABORTY

Once, there was a patch of moss on a fallen tree trunk. We ran our hands through it. We sat on it. When we did so, we crushed the spores. We crushed insects.

Once, whenever we saw an insect, we'd swat it or smooch it in a wad of toilet paper. How to trap and kill an insect can sometimes be an entire plot point in our romantic comedies.

We sometimes make lovely romantic comedies.

Once, we made crackers and cookies in all kinds of shapes: elephants, lions, circles, stars. We have trouble believing anything is real unless we can swallow it.

More than once, we have poisoned the water.

We are so very afraid that you will think we are trying to hurt you.

We are so very sorry we could not send you "Here Comes the Sun." It was written in a garden where there were purple and yellow flowers, and a windmill, and moss.

What we need is for you to listen to our arias, our ragas, and our syncopations, and to think that we are worthy of saving. Or at least deserving of a gentle vigil.

We would also like if you could look at our demonstrations of licking, eating, and drinking, and tell us how we work.

Once, we touched our unwashed hands to one another's lips. Once, we took pictures of the insides of our bodies. Once, we tapped messages to each other in languages we invented for when only silence and percussion would do, and we heard our tools scrape against one another, and a wild dog bleated somewhere far away. We walked. Our hearts beat. We laughed.

—

The Voyager Golden Records are two phonograph records that were included on NASA's 1977 Voyager spacecraft launches. They were intended as something of a message-in-a-bottle to any extraterrestrials they may have encountered. In the words of then-President Jimmy Carter, the records were conceived as "a present from a small, distant world, a token of our sounds, our science, our images, our music, our thoughts and our feelings." They excluded a great deal, whether for copyright reasons, for concerns about explicit content, for fear of the record being taken as a sign of aggression, and for the many other justifications we give for exclusions.

LAMENTING A PARTY

BRUNO DARIO
translated by KIT SCHLUTER

Like an absurd round of applause in the middle of a funeral
the echo of my river appears dropping your sails
and the night out drinking with friends
morphs into the smell of a dried up rat playing cards.

The wall's skin sweats my name;
you lose perspective in the distance.
I'm the fire that consumes the stroller and you
the child saved by many hands

dirty, but hands nevertheless.

The boneless punishment chugs down your laugh
like a poetry of boogers stuck to your face
I'm blinding you to the world.

I plow the branches in an abandoned language:
my body is a spyglass,
my veins, sleepless oars.

The paper I'm writing on slits me;
whoever reads these words is making them up.
I am the ghost of the funny face you cast into oblivion,

I am the beakless swan who eats through his wings.

LAMENTAR UNA FIESTA

Como un aplauso absurdo en mitad del funeral
aparece el eco de mi río tumbando tu velero
y la noche de copas con amigos
se convierte en hedor a rata seca jugando cartas.

La piel del muro suda mi nombre;
pierdes perspectiva en la distancia;
soy el incendio que abrasa la carriola
y tú, la niña que salvaron varias manos

sucias, pero manos.

El castigo deshuesado se bebe tu risa;
como una poesía de moco que se te pega en la cara
voy cegándote del mundo.

Surco las ramas en un lenguaje abandonado:
mi cuerpo es un catalejo,
mis venas, remos despiertos.

Me corta este papel en el que escribo;
quien lee estas palabras está inventándolas.
Soy el fantasma de la mueca que arrojaste al olvido,

soy el cisne sin pico que come por las alas.

IF-ELSE

GINGER KO

If we are separated
 and our sole means of connection severed
then chance would never recover.
 That these words might bask in your regard
feels so full if I don't believe in it
 so empty if I do.
During the heavy descent of my velvet
 I'm drugged with myself
wanting a mirror of my own consumption
 wanting twin fires at the top of a night hill.
You've gone from me.
 A memory between us
no longer confirmed by both
 belongs just to me.

But if there is a single keeper
 the memory becomes corrupted
by a heart that does whatever it can.
 Waiting to meet for the first time
was the only time I was sure
 you felt the same way
about me as I felt about you.
 I am self-conscious of the way
you look when you've forgotten me.
 Vines choked the trees around our house.
We were sitting inside
 and listening when each of them fell.

Reader, you wouldn't be able to see
 my lover in a crowd
you wouldn't pause your gaze
 on their nondescript clothing
and unremarkable looks.
 But, watching, you would see someone
walking purposefully
 in loving recognition
toward someone staying in place
 and you would suddenly see them
their lurid figure
 their beauty

the ribbon wrapped around a braid for me
waiting as if they've just knocked
on the door of my house at night
knowing that only I was awake
to hear them.

**OUT OF OUR BARBAROUS AND SAVAGE MODE OF LIFE
(ELEFSINA, EPOPTeia)**

ANJULI RAZA KOLB

This used to be time alone
time injunct the uninitiate
Place enjoined from time together
priestess barred from holding time

In a carved sandal bead
a seed
a string
an ear of corn in silence
reaped a double-hour after dusk
 slip-dropped lens
 etched with
 vermin bites and
 vermin scratches

If you google Ismene
you see she is a goody-goody
Ismene meaning
Ismene personality
Ismene quotes
Tied up in the play
monologic Ismene
Do the right thing Ismene

Google Anarkali,
and know she is a panther
spring loaded like Helen
Anarkali slave
Anarkali suit
She weaves the battle threnody
Knife hearted Anarkali
cemented in crouched
to pounce

Should we tell you about Penthisilea?
Hierophant in war
Hierophant in tits and their inconveniences

We're all in the pantheon

ears blocked
it was used to sound
it used to sound like this
descant of resignings
open fifth of double-hours

FOG

KATIE PETERSON

I wish you would come back
is what we say to what
we love.
Also, go away

Any return structures a day –
naked, my sister and I
greeted our father
dancing and laughing at the door.
We were almost too young to speak.
Did that ever happen?

Without you, I can't describe you,
I say to the fog,
you are different than people. I can't hold you
at a distance, can't keep space.

Though your cause
lifted you up, it did not release you.

Recantation of the ocean,
as faithful as possible, for a variable sort of
spirit, you're not like smoke, I can breathe you,
you cannot take down a house.

ABECEDARIAN FOR ALZHEIMER'S

JOY PRIEST

Angel was my pappaw's girlfriend when he died.
Back there, in my memory, I hear my mother fussing about
condoms & *AIDS!* she is saying, *the girl is 25 & Black!* My
daddy, who'd learned to laugh at the irony of racism, whispering: *He's at his
end anyway.* Angel was stripping at Déjà Vu when he moved her into the
front bedroom & this is where I began to realize what, precisely, was
going on: He couldn't remember me, but by then he was forgetting who
he was too. Outside the club, next to our world-famous horseracing track, the
infamous sign read: *Win-Place-Show Bar | 99 Pretty Girls & 1 Ugly One!* A
jab at Angel—their only dark-skinned dancer. She mystified them with her
kaleidoscope of color contacts & quick weaves. They loved her *equine* legs. I
loved her for telling my secret loud, for making a messy joke of him & my
mother the way I felt they had made a mess of me. After Angel moved in I
never saw him again. My mother avoided his street. She could not get
over his hypocrisy: How he'd disowned her when I was born, then made her
promise not to speak of my blackness, my father, to me. Buried hole of
quiet lies they dug for years before it opened beneath the two of us &
ruined everything. Maybe my mother envied Angel because she
saw the truth of him out & when he began forgetting
to hate us, to put his white hood on every day, Angel
used him the proper way. I like to think of her as
Veritas, the goddess of truth at the bottom of that empty
well, naked & holding a hand mirror. Or maybe it was me, a
xeric un-blooming thing down there beneath them. I had, for
years, been taught to live that way: Black, unassuming,
zipped up in history—a disease progress cannot cure.

BOY

GLENIS REDMOND

I say, boy, pay attention when I'm talkin' to ya, boy.

Foghorn Leghorn

He's pockmarked, and bullet ridden.
Learns to dance, duck and dodge

with his head raised or lowered.
He knew either way they coming for you.

Boy be another way to pin you into place.
Grind metal into precious flesh,

a weighted word aimed and hurled,
meant to maim—slow kill preferably.

At the Poinsett Hotel
he's back bent busboy busy

clearing tables and washing dishes
trying everything he knows

to grow full height
into becoming a man.

His change so short
he figures he can't there from here.

One day he thinks, *If one more person
calls me boy. I'll kill em.*

The next day instead of punching the clock
he finds the Air Force Recruitment office.

Signs his legal name: Johnny Clifton Redmond.
Exchanges apron for fatigues.

Swaps battlefields.

DRAWING FROM LIFE

LISA RUSS SPAAR

is the same, really, as conjuring
from memory, with just a shorter lapse.

That night I stood on a verge,
backlit, & you emptied your pockets

of all the old keys, I saw from the doorway
my life doubled in your flashing eyes.

Yet how could I have, the room so dark? But did.
A good look requires backing up.

We did, then threw our selves into time's
contraption, but to our own scale, so close-

up that egg, shell, womb, air could be re-entered,
limned & shared again, again, to the tune of a hair's breadth

exhalation, a line of being we beckon still, reckoning
with ears, with eyes. Mouths. This pen.

FORTY DAYS

MICHAEL JOSEPH WALSH

At one point I dreamt
I was getting the better of this.
I had been breathed on at least
in another age. Time flows

into the sleepless joint of the poem,
the small life of these words,
the melted year.
& light will open

& the eye will
pursue bravely this ugly motif,
going there, without us,
in sickness, remembering health

in its varieties half-
viscous a dozen names
left on a surface
for twelve hours, thirty, a year.

That I have swallowed something
worth the while, let that be the record of my love.
Let a language build up
as this image wears away.

Next June I will touch your face,
strange friend.
This is a story I've already dreamed.

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and thanks to our communities and friends in South Carolina, Colorado, and elsewhere.
Please take care of yourselves and each other. We love you.