

Bodies of Colour: A Poetic Script

Rommi Smith



Rommi Smith was commissioned by Manchester Literature Festival and the Whitworth, The University of Manchester to create a poetic response to the Bodies of Colour: Breaking with Stereotypes in the Wallpaper Collection exhibition. The resulting script, a collaboration between poet, playwright and performer Rommi Smith, musician and composer Dave Evans and performance director Sonia Hughes was performed at The Whitworth on Thursday 18 October as part of the 2018 Manchester Literature Festival.

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the Whitworth





1. DAVE IS ALREADY PLAYING AS THE AUDIENCE ARRIVE. TWO - THREE APPROPRIATE IMPROVISATIONS INSPIRED BY THE COLOURS AND THE STORIES OF THE WALLPAPER IN THE EXHIBITION SPACES. ROMMI IS WITH THE AUDIENCE DOWNSTAIRS, SHE MOVES UPSTAIRS AS THE BULK OF THE AUDIENCE MOVES UPSTAIRS.

2. ROMMI GOES TO HER LECTERN AT THE TOP CORNER OF THE STAIRS NEXT TO SONIA BOYCE'S: **DEVOTIONAL WALLPAPER**.



1. AMPLITUDE (WITH MUSIC)

(INSPIRED BY "DEVOTIONAL WALLPAPER" BY SONIA BOYCE, 2008)

Praising each of their names, each
bigger than a stone, as meaningful as moon,
more precious than price, each greater
than its sable-weight

dropped in midnight's river
to radiate, concentric circles
of soundwave. Hear a Dove
place a note in the mouth
of a Nightingale; gift
to the shell of the ear

carried across time,
across water, to where we are
now, palm to the skin of the river
a portal through
which we and those behind -
step through -

AT THE END OF POEM, ROMMI LOOKS AT DEVOTIONAL WALLPAPER WITH THE AUDIENCE. SHE THEN TAKES OFF HER COAT AND HANDS IT TO A VOLUNTEER, WHO HANDS HER THE CLIPBOARD WITH THE NEXT POEM ON IT.

ROMMI MOVES TO THE SECOND STOP IN THE TOUR: ROMMI'S TONE OF VOICE IS MARKS & SPENCER'S CHRISTMAS ADVERT/SHIPPING FORECAST/ FOOTBALL SCORES ANNOUNCER. THE VOICE DOESN'T START ON THE SAME MUSICAL NOTE EVERY TIME. WHEN POINTING OUT THE FEATURES OF THE WALLPAPER, NOT EVERY NAME NEEDS TO BE POINTED OUT AS A FEATURE IN THE WALLPAPER, ROMMI JUST INTIMATES IT IS THERE VIA A LOOK THAT SUGGESTS THAT IT MAY BE PRESENT IN THE WALLPAPER.



2. AFTER FARROW AND BALL* (WITHOUT MUSIC)

(INSPIRED BY "VUES DE L'INDE - PAYSAGE INDIEN" - BY DUFOUR ET CIE
(MANUFACTURER) BEFORE 1815)

Silvergate
Renaissance
Arcade
Orangery

Ranelagh
Brocade
Sapphire
Aranami

Uppark
Lotus
St Antoine
Peony

Toile Trellis
Tessella
Brockhampton Star
Hornbeam

Rosslyn
Ringwold
Helleborus
Paisley

Jasmine
Ocelot
Blotma
Bumble Bee

Amime
Wisteria
Shouchikubai
Yukutori

Atacama
Feathergrass
Tourbillon
Hegemone.

* The words of the poem are exact titles and taken from the 2018 range of Farrow and Ball wallpapers.

BY THE END OF THE WORD **HEGEMONE**, ROMMI IS AT THE OTHER END OF TRIPTYCH. ROMMI MOVES TO FAR END OF CENTRAL TABLE (SHE IS HOLDING THE ROLL OF LINING PAPER)



3. WITNESS STATEMENT IN WHICH SHE CONFESSES* (WITH MUSIC)

(PERFORMED IN RESPONSE TO ZINEB SEDIRA'S UNE GENERATION DE FEMMES, 1997)

Four walls provoke me first.
Next, bars appear for a score

that demands I'll sing the single-note of my wedding ring.
Faithful, I obey. I honour – but save love.

(PICKS UP ROLL OF PAPER AT WEDDING DRESS)

Next, I take the costume of my wedding dress
from the highest shelf and dusting it of its ignorance,

**(ROMMI ROLLS OUT THE LINING PAPER WITH HELP OF THE AUDIENCE;
VISUAL INFERENCE OF WEDDING DRESS TRAIN)**

I hold it to the trace of my outline;
the looking-glass sees me as ghost before my time:

my sunken eyes, my skin of ash,
my lips of lustreless desire,

which mouth the words to the vows he wants to hear.
Then with his key, my husband enters what is mine;

**(ROMMI MOVES DOWN THE TABLE WRITING WORDS ON THE LINING PAPER,
AS SHE FEELS LIKE IT)**

the room learns the word cold;
and one magpie flies past the window.

And though I laugh, to put him off the scent of what it means
to pay for a sow's purse with silken ovaries,

something has to change. So, when he leaves,
forbidding me paper and pen,

prescribing me eternal rest, as I wrap myself in the silence
of our barren marriage bed, I am plotting.

Dark and sleep steep themselves in dream,
though I am estranged from each of them.

When the moon turns witness,
and the stars are her accomplice,

I rise from my resting place,
and with the gleam of an idea in my bare hands

I slay the bleak dog who has followed me, devoted,
down these slow, grey years of matrimony.

Grief on my hands, I grind its bones to dust
and mix the dust with tears to make an ink

and with the half-moon nail of a fingertip,
I write and write and write the story of my life

on each page of wall, each word a spell of yellow
each metaphor transforming the vision at the window

til, in the mirror's length, I see how I blush,
my skin luminous, my hair aflame, my lips

the shade of what separates us
from the dead. For what woman could live

with herself, if the only thing in life she feeds
with sweetmeats from her own dreams

is the black dog that chases her?
A woman who haunts the white-feint pages

of the book she'll never write,
who'll never understand how the mistress of line

will seduce you from your sleep, keep you restless
as a test of what commitment means.

And what woman could forsake the love of paper and pen,
any more than her own reflection?

I know I couldn't. So, you see,
I had to lay the dog to rest.

I have no regrets.
No, Sir, I'd do it again.

I tell you this, with every inch of my words as witness
that I was here: I am. I do. I exist.

* Originally commissioned by Alchemy, as part of its project The Haunting (a celebration of the ghost story), the monologue-poem takes its inspiration from Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892)

ROMMI KEEPS EYE CONTACT WITH AUDIENCE MEMBERS CLOSEST TO HER. AT THE END OF POEM, ROMMI HANDS OUT BLACK/DARK CRAYONS, ONE TO RANDOM AUDIENCE MEMBERS AND ENCOURAGES THEM TO WRITE ON THE LINING PAPER IN RESPONSE TO THE WORDS SHE HAS WRITTEN ON THE PAPER. SHE STANDS AMONGST THEM A BIT LONGER THAN NECESSARY.

DAVE CONTINUES TO PLAY. ROMMI MOVES AWAY FROM TABLE AND SWAPS HEADPHONES. ROMMI TAKES THE MEGAPHONE AND MARCHES INTO NEXT GALLERY SPACE.



4. FARROW AND BALL STRIPE*: A REPRISE (SOLO)

(INSPIRED BY VIRGIL MARTI'S "BULLIES", 1992-1997)

Broad Stripe
Block Print Stripe
Chromatic Stripe
Drab.

Plain Stripe
Tented Stripe
Closet Stripe
Drag.

* The words of the poem are exact titles and taken from the 2018 range of Farrow and Ball wallpapers.

ROMMI HANDS MEGAPHONE TO VOLUNTEER, THEN SETTLES WITHIN THE
FRAME OF THE NEXT WALLPAPER



5. NOTE FOR THE LUMINARIES OF THE SCHOOL YEAR BOOK

(INSPIRED BY VIRGIL MARTI'S "BULLIES" 1992-1997)

"A library is a place that is a repository of information and gives every citizen equal access to it...It's a community space. It's a place of safety, a haven from the world." – **Neil Gaiman.**

it took ten years after playground taunts;
fistfuls of shadow; morning's glint
on the jagged edge of a stolen pint of milk –

for time and distance to offer their philosophies,
a place where words might understand me differently.

My finger tracing shelves marked A: Auden,
B, Baldwin, C, Colette;
then words rose to the surface: haunt, hunt, hurt.

Yet trust urged me to move further on
through quiet rooms of reflection:
past safety, sanctuary, searching, til the name
Sartre and: "freedom is what you do with what's been done to you."

It took ten years more to reach the letter W:
(ROMMI MOVES OUT OF THE FRAME OF THE WALLPAPER)
Walker, Waugh, Wilde - and "each man kills
the thing he loves" or tries...)

I decide to take the Year Book
from a dusty basement shelf
and find the page where you reside

eyes (or shame) hidden by shades. I take paper,
glitter, pen, glue, scissors,
recast you into rightful rainbow light,

your high cheekbones almost sharp
enough to cut your own stereotypes,
your face, in this light, revealing an unsaid
something - a longing, you could never name.



6. MONEY, MISSISSIPPI: 1955

(INSPIRED BY THE LIFE AND STORY OF EMMETT TILL, THE ORATORY OF MAMIE TILL-MOBLEY AND A RESPONSE TO ROBERT GOBER'S HANGING MAN/SLEEPING MAN (1989) AND CATH KIDSTON'S COWBOY WALLPAPER (2018)

Journalist: "Do you have any evidence bearing on this case?"

Mamie Till-Mobley: "I do know that this is my son."

"White supremacist ideology is based first and foremost on the degradation of black bodies in order to control them. One of the best ways to instil fear in people is to terrorize them. Yet this fear is best sustained by convincing them that their bodies are ugly, their intellect is inherently underdeveloped, their culture is less civilized, and their future warrants less concern than that of other peoples." Cornell West. 1994. *Race Matters*. New York: Vintage Books Edition, p.122

Not bodies... Not body...
Write: my black-skinned, light-eyed son.
Born breech. Head heavenward.
Feet facing south.

Chicago-tongued. Quick-
quipped; more than a John Doe
in a notebook-sketch, kept
by policemen as evidence
of what injustice won't admit.

Don't tell me we walked
all the way from Jubilee
through Jim Crow
to arrive at the place

where a boy can still enter
a store with a nickel
for candy and leave
with the dust of his
name in a small paper bag.

Let me tell you:
*"what happens to any of us,
anywhere in the world,
had better be the business of us all."*

Write this: I chose an open casket,
to "let the people see what I've seen [...]"
not as a title for a painting.

Write this: a painter's brush
will never author features
as a mother's body does.

Write this: Till - our name - the hinge
of a word you'll need
to measure the distance between
what is and what should be.

Write this: I will tell the story of my son's body,
and if Law still sleeps, I'll speak
until the Tallahatchie coursing through
its dreams.

ROMMI JOINS THE AUDIENCE AND IS LOOKING AT THE WALLPAPER WITH
THEM.

Write this down: my son's dreams,
bigger than the hoop
of John Wayne's Hollywood lasso.

DAVE STOPS PLAYING JUST BEFORE THE WORDS: 'John Wayne's Hollywood lasso.'

END

Note on photography

The following artworks are featured in the background of the photographs:

(Page 1 and 9)

Niki de Saint Phalle (artist) 1930 – 2002

Marburger Tapetenfabrik J.B Shaefer GMBH and Co KG (manufacturer) est. 1845

Nana 1972

Screen printed

Made in Germany

Presented to the Whitworth by Walter Eitel of Marburger Tapetenfabrik in 1986

w. 1986.3 the Whitworth, the University of Manchester

©Niki de Saint Phalle

(Page 3)

Sonia Boyce (artist) b. 1962

Devotional Wallpaper, 2008

Hand screen printed

Made in England

Purchased from Sonia Boyce in 2009

w.2009.48.1 the Whitworth, the University of Manchester

©Sonia Boyce

(Page 4)

Dufour et Cie (manufacturer) 1804-65

Vues de L'Inde (Paysage Indien) before 1815

9 of 25 panels (4,6,7-12 and 14)

Hand block printed wallpaper

Made in France

Presented by the Wallpaper Manufacturers Ltd. In 1967

w.1967.176.1 the Whitworth, the University of Manchester

©the Whitworth, the University of Manchester

(Page 10)

Virgil Marti (artist) b. 1962

Bullies 1992-97

Hand screen printed wallpaper with fluorescent ink and rayon flock on Tyvek

Purchased in 2010

w. 2010.1.1 the Whitworth, the University of Manchester

©Virgil Marti

(Page 11)

Robert Gober (artist) b.1954

Norton Blumenthal Inc. (manufacturer)

Hanging Man/Sleeping Man

Hand screen printed wallpaper made in the United States of America

Purchased from Robert Gober Studio in 2009

w. 2009.12.1

© Robert Gober