

Scholar@UPRM

House of words, The bicentennial

Item Type	Poem
Authors	DeGenaro, Bill
Publisher	Centro de Publicaciones Académicas, Facultad de Artes y Ciencias, Universidad de Puerto Rico en Mayagüez
Download date	2025-02-13 06:58:27
Link to Item	https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.11801/3291

HOUSE OF WORDS

Bill DeGenaro

At three or four I learned to read.
My sister Anna sat me
on a wooden chair with casters,
formed letters and words
on an easeled blackboard
our dad brought home from school.

Anna buckled me to the chair
with an old belt,
raced me around the house full speed
whenever my mind wandered.

I would holler
cries of terror and delight,
cries that amplified the rusty
squeaking of the casters,
belt just tight
enough to keep me upright.

Still belted in,
I listened to Anna
read Richard Scary,
the labeled scenes—
schoolhouses, kitchens, pop-up campers—
no narrative, no story,
words.

Words Anna copied in chalk,
the careful font of a classroom
alphabet border.
She sounded out each letter,
defining, de-mystifying,
deconstructing the meaning
of a 'b,' a 'u,' an 's,'
transforming the abstract
into the concrete
as I mouthed her
phonemic chants,
repeated Richard Scary's
everyday words
like a believer saying "Amen,"
my heavenly reward a thrill ride
through the kitchen,
dining room, foyer,
rooms full of
windowsrugschairswalls
scenes from Richard Scary.

I imagined Scary's
labels in our house
as I whirled through the rooms.
Today I wonder if Anna
chose her methods
on purpose, if she
wanted me to think
of our house as a house
full of words,
if she wanted words to be a
thrill ride
that required a seat belt.

THE BICENTENNIAL

*You walk up in front of me,
Miss Marian.
I carry Master William back here.
It don't look right, me
walking with no
white woman.*

Malcolm Howell cradles
me in his massive hands,
the black, raw hands of a
West Virginia coal miner.
Starched white dress shirt,
work pants, scuffless brown
workshoes, he makes his way
to the teller, asks for all
silver dollars.

Mr. Howell buys fresh
goat's milk from my mother,
only pays with money
right from the bank.
*Miss Marian, I don't want
you to touch no dirty money.*

He signs the slip with an X,
emits a deep cough, fills
his pants pockets with
brand new 1976 bicentennial
coins, a grandson of slaves,
and we leave the bank
carrying history.

Mr. Howell's home
is the smell of
furniture polish, mild bleach,

Josephine Howell's biscuits.
After the bank I eat two
with a glass of goat's milk.

My mother reads Mr. Howell
some papers, one eye
watching me drop crumbs on
pristine linoleum.
I tell Mrs. Howell
about the goats
who gave my dad the milk
that morning.
Her grey, straightened
hair pulled back,
tight, into a round bun.
Light skin, glasses
with round frames,
skirt to the polished floor,
Mrs. Howell tells me
her mama, half free, and
her grandmama before that,
had a hundred ways to cook
a goat, one ear listening
to my mother's alien words—
black lung, class action.

To three-year-old ears
"master" and "miss" lack weight,
having only a certain music
like the music of *I reckon* and
I'm fixin' to and
grandmama worked in the house.

I hope the Howells heard
my mother's gentle,
ineffectual protests:
Everyone calls me Marian, or

Everyone calls him Billy.

I hope her words had some history,
some weight of their own.

Months later, after

trips to the lawyers,
drives to the mining office,

forms,
papers,

visits to specialists,

a settlement, a check.

Again, the bank.

Give Miss Marian

Mr. Howell insists

*A brand new five-hundred
Dollar bill.*

Well then, how many

one-hundred dollar

bills make that much?

More protests but he

insists she take it.

That night a swanky

Italian dinner.

The next week we tell

Mr. Howell what we ate,

he smiles.

Full of thanks, my

mother confesses the bill

was almost seventy-five

dollars, which Mr. Howell

laughs off as a *tall tale*.

Mrs. Howell treats

herself to new white carpet

and my mother, eyeing my shoes,

worries aloud it will show dirt.

Miss Marian, if there

any dirt in my house

I want to know about it.

Bill DeGenaro

University of Michigan-Dearborn

United States of America