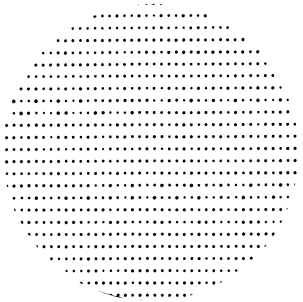
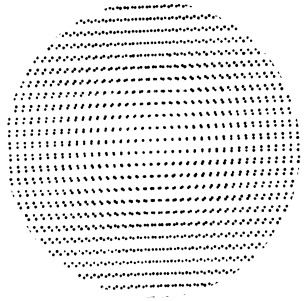
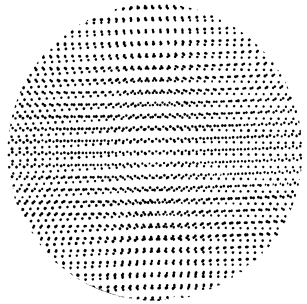
Some Silences







SOME SILENCES
Notes on Small Press

Cameron Anstee

2 0 | Apt. 9 Press
2 4 | Ottawa

For Nelson Ball &
Michael Dennis

[...] the privilege of conveying the tradition
momentarily through history [...]

Arthur Cravan
Ravings of a Backlane Historian: reflections on smallpress (1997)

this long failing at preservation

Phil Hall
Notes from Gethsemani (2014)

It is 2024. I am 37 years old. I have been writing poetry seriously for some two decades, and for most of it I have also been engaged in some form in the world of the small press (whether as a reader, a poet, an editor, a publisher, a researcher, a bookseller). And yet, even after twenty years, it feels like I am just beginning in this world.

In the earliest of those years, when I was 18, during a second-year CanLit survey, Professor Collett Tracey introduced me to Contact Press. I was immediately taken with the idea of Raymond Souster quietly working throughout his life writing poems, and then for a decade or two in middle of the twentieth century, *from his basement*, making mimeographed books and magazines that re-shaped how poetry was written and published in this country. Shortly thereafter I began learning how to make chapbooks during my time working with In/Words, the little magazine and press Collett ran. There were earlier moments too, such as when I was a teenager and gradually came to understand that my father's collection of books was astonishing—books by Beat and San Francisco and New York School writers filled the corners of our house, books that were published by small presses run by editors who did it mostly because they felt these books should exist (though I couldn't have identified them as small presses yet).

The lesson I took from these earliest encounters with books I found I cared about was that the act of writing can involve quite a bit more than simply writing. To write, in the sense of a lifelong practice embedded in a particular literary community, means so many other things. I couldn't have defined those other things when I first encountered them, and honestly still struggle to articulate them today. In fact, through my first two decades doing this, in each overlapping role right up to today, I have never been entirely at ease with the term *small press*. It has always felt elusive because it can mean so many different things to so many different people, entirely dependent on the contexts of the conversation and its participants. That is something I confront anytime I try to speak about the small press or about what a writing practice is (about what my writing practice is), given how intertwined and unstable the two are.

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All of which is preamble to say that in these small notes, what I want to do is to set down a few thoughts about my experience writing poetry from inside the small press. I have tried and failed to articulate some of this in a more objective way in academic spaces, and I'm not interested in doing that again here. Instead, I am going to happily dodge any dense theoretical discussion—look, no works cited![1]—and strive to speak simply about my experience of all of this, as entirely contingent and historically embedded as it is and has been and always will be.

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I have long been interested in the question of what it means (what it could mean) to have a career in the small press. I don't mean career in a financial sense (ha!), I mean in the sense of keeping going, of staying active, of sustaining one's interest. What do I want out of such a career? What models are there to be followed? What can I give to it? What is it possible to accomplish, or, what is a *small press* accomplishment?

But before any of that, thinking simply as a poet, these are the prospects I find myself able to imagine:

In the short term, there may be moments of validation—a good review, an invitation to read, a reading that goes well, an acceptance to a magazine, an award. These things are nice (of course they are!), but they strike me as ultimately fleeting. After each one, you still have to wake up the next day and try to figure out what a poem is all over again, or how to write a book. I don't think you can build a sustainable career—in the sense of *keeping going*—on those things or on the ambition to achieve them because they can't be fulfilled in any final way, because they fade as soon as they arrive, because they are not themselves fulfilling.

In the long term, the likelihood of a poem or a book you write still being read in 25 or 50 or 100 years is small (or in 1 or 2 years or less for the pessimistic among us). Think of the writers who have survived in the sense that they are still read beyond the bounds of their own eras. For the poets, most are known by a handful of pages (perhaps they are primarily known by names more than by the poems themselves, or by *titles* more than by names).

Each who has survived likely has a reader who knows, intimately, the full bibliography, the deep cuts, the weird little pamphlets, the middle-period works relegated to the discard pile. A few lucky ones might even have a handful of such readers! Those readers are an exception (because we can't all read everyone deeply, nor can we all have such a reader) but also an ideal (because who wouldn't want a reader like that?) and a necessity (because the poets who survive in this sense do it largely on the goodwill and work of such a person). But I digress.

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What one has, finally, I think, is the work—the process (and promise) of, the struggle with, the community within which it happens, and the hope that it may be interesting to you (let alone anyone else) in a few months or years or decades.

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If you hang around the poetry world long enough, you will eventually encounter the argument that poetry (and by extension the small press) has little-to-nothing meaningful to offer, and that we know this because its readership is finally so small. Good sales are generally measured in the hundreds, and of those hundreds, how many read and re-read with close attention? (And I don't mean that as an attack on those kind readers who bought your book—it is just that there are too many books to read and re-read each one deeply.) The argument made is that if you had something of value to say, you would find an outlet that offers more than a few hundred readers, that held the promise of a significant audience, that could reach enough people to make a difference.

I've never quite understood the dismissive tone of this perspective. Imagine that 50, or 25, or 10, or 5, or even just 1 or 2 people chose to sit with your poem, or your weird little magazine, or your oddly structured essay, to really sit and engage with the work. What a remarkable thing that would be![2] I also think that this perspective misses the deep and sustaining friendships that develop in small press and poetry communities, and that are vital not only to helping people to keep making art but also simply to helping people. I owe many of the most important and enduring friendships of my life to these communities and the ways that they develop. The small press gift economy not only finds ways to make and distribute art that are that little bit less beholden to capitalism, but also creates and maintains friendships, all the while seeing genuine value in small communities.

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Beyond the proportions of our immediate communities that can often feel fairly modest, readers of the small press also run up against the fact that the small press as a broader practice is both *too voluminous* and *ultimately fleeting*. There is simply too much of it to encounter, to collect, to hold in your brain at once. You can't know everything that happened before you, nor can you read everything by everyone, nor can you remember every poet, or press, or reading series—in your country, in your city, in your neighbourhood, today and yesterday and tomorrow. These things exceed our capacity to encounter them, and then pass, inevitably and essentially. You pick your people and read them deeply, and you also try to read widely, all the while knowing that you can't reach it all (or it can't reach you).

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That it is all fleeting was the nagging question saturating my academic life, and that stills bother me today—What next? Or, so what? What happens to all this knowledge, and to all these books? (And in my more self-centred moments—what will happen to my books? To whatever I've put into or helped put into the world?) Well, it and they will pass of course. It is constructed and then dispersed; some is destroyed or lost, some is salvaged, and some is found again in a year or a decade or a century. Some might gather dust in an archive, some might decompose in a landfill. Books, as technology, are astoundingly durable, but along a long enough timeline they fail like everything else.

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And I don't think that any of that is a burden. I think it is a kind of liberation from the burden of whatever idea you may have of success, and an invitation to think more broadly about what the work actually is.

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The work, in the small press, is more than the poem you are trying to write. To be engaged in the small press is to be intimately involved in a network of activities, and it is to direct those activities to a communal project. Small press writers are also small press editors, and publishers, and readers, and booksellers, and reading series coordinators, and audience members, and researchers, *and*, *and*, *and*. To be engaged in the small press is to see the symbiosis of these activities, and not to draw any hard lines between them. Each is part of the work of small press writing because there is no small press without this messy pile of activities (however it is that you ultimately define the small press for yourself). Some years you may be all of them, and others maybe just one or two, but within our individual resources we each endeavour to keep some small corner of the whole thing going.

The small press also does this wonderful thing where it retains an element of the handmade—small press objects so often show openly their ways of being constructed—offering a material lesson to anyone looking to learn, one(s) marked by the person(s) who made them. Our responsibility is to the idea of the small press, to ensuring that the conditions of possibility are there for the next generation, who despite their own best efforts won't be able to know everything that came before either, and will confront the same problems before handing it all off to the next shift.

Your thing, the thing you put your best literary self and resources into, is going to be forgotten. The question of posterity is how long that process will take, not whether it will occur. But that's ok. You helped the whole big, unwieldy, dispersed thing along, and because of that work—acknowledged or not—the next kids will show up to find something vibrant and alive and worth investing themselves in. They'll call out all the blind spots from the previous iterations (yours among them) and they'll make their own mistakes, but they'll keep it alive too.

It is a custody shared between each of us today, the folders-and-staplers of yesterday, and each person who might find or make a small press book tomorrow.

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In 2020, Michael Dennis died. He was a good man and a good poet, and he loved books and poetry more than anyone I know. He left behind a library of some nine or ten thousand books of poetry. I spent time in that library with him when he was alive, and alone after he died. It is such a lovely thing to be surrounded by books, floor-to-ceiling on each wall, that someone slowly and carefully spent a lifetime assembling. It is also a sad experience in other ways. It is disorienting to think of how many poets publish books and yet remain effectively unknown and unread, or who were read once but just aren't any longer. To think of how many editors poured hours and days and years into interesting small presses that had to end for one reason or another and haven't had bibliographies or histories written in the years since for reasons very often unrelated to merit.

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Sitting in Michael's library after he died, I thought how different it feels as a reader compared to how it feels as a writer. That was something I wasn't prepared for after my first book came out. I am sitting here in my own library with a stack of books by _____ next to me, and so I have this sense *as a reader* of an ongoing conversation with their work, but it is one-sided in so far as they don't know that I have these books next to me, they don't know that we are in a conversation even though they're doing all the talking and I'm doing all the listening. Or maybe it is _____, who died decades ago and didn't know (because of course they couldn't have known) that their work would be interesting to some obscure minimalist poet in the twenty-first century. For the reader, the book is present, it is a presence, it is being read and reread, but for most writers there is only silence once it goes out into the world and the hope that perhaps you are in a conversation—or a friendship, really—the depths and duration of which you can never really be aware.

I mean that beyond the feelings most writers have that they don't get reviewed often enough, or their work isn't understood, or their sales are inadequate. I mean a more total silence, a kind of mathematical silence, the silence of one book against the millions and millions and millions of books that exist (or existed (or will exist)). Think of the difficulty of keeping a work in print for one decade or two, let alone across a century. And I also mean the kind of immediate silence of not knowing whether the book is being read here and now. Someone might have your book open in their hands at this exact moment, they could be sitting somewhere in conversation *with you*, and you will most likely never know. Even if that reader is the generous type who sends notes to writers saying *Hey, I liked your book*, that lovely and kind gesture still doesn't communicate the *ongoingness* of the relationship each of us has as readers to books and writers to whom we frequently come back.

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These silences are pressing for living writers and accompany the dead ones. You can only let the work go I think, and hope that it finds the right hands in the future, that is, someone who will be sympathetic to it, who will open it and read it through and for whom it may spark a response, and who may come back and read it again. That reader might be alive today, or they might be a few decades away, or maybe they're out there but won't ever find your book among the millions of other books. The final outcome—silence—will of course be the same whether that reader and your book find each other, but you'll have done your part.

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Books are great—of course they are!—but the idea of living a life in the small press or in poetry is something else. There is no moment when you will have made it, no finish; there is just the ongoing work of making poems, or books, or organizing events, or whatever part of it you're putting your own energy and resources behind. Maybe that work occasionally gets some attention, but it will pass so, so quickly. Publish books, and chapbooks, and leaflets, and weird little magazines, yes, as often as you want and are able to, but my feeling is that it is best to try to do so with a hopeful eye on the much longer history you're engaging with—the full scope of which is forever out of sight—and with an understanding that your moment in that history is both very small and totally essential, rather than on some immediate pay off in public recognition or success (critical, financial) or whatever other short-term validation is occasionally available.

So—and this is too easy to say—don't be resentful that you didn't get enough reviews, or didn't win that award, or weren't published by that magazine. It matters a great deal and it doesn't matter at all.

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To keep going, you need to feel you are making good work—or moving in the direction of making good work, or interesting work, or are interested in the work you are making—and see that as the thing you are aiming to do. Anything good that happens beyond that is a bonus, but the first thing has to be the work and your relation to it. Even poets who write excellent books and are acknowledged in their time for those excellent books have lean years. They write lousy fourth or tenth books, they get bad reviews, they aren't invited to read quite so often, they slip just that little bit further out of view than small press poets already are, and they still need to wake up each day and figure out what it is they're trying to do on the page and, if they're lucky, occasionally how actually to do it.

The ego side of it is hard—continuing to make things, feeling there is value in that, while knowing it will meet silence whether this year or another. I think that is part of why I like to make chapbooks by other writers, and to research small press people and operations I'm interested in, and to edit books by poets I love when I get the chance. All that other stuff that collectively creates this thing we call the small press takes place in the same field as the writing, but it isn't about you and your own poems. It is in a space between the writing and the reading and makes both of those other things possible. It is active and generative, and you're helping to push back against the silence for at least a little while in the name of someone whom you feel is deserving. So in the small press, put your resources—whatever they are—into supporting work you believe in and into creating a space where that work can exist and be encountered. Maybe it is time, or money, or your body (in the audience at a reading, at a table folding and stapling chapbooks, in a library learning about who made what before you arrived). It all contributes, and nothing happens without it.

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What I hope for, finally, is to get to the end (whenever that is), look back at what I've managed to create (whatever forms it may have taken), think that it isn't awful, and maybe find that some of it helped the greater small press project. That is, I hope it will have helped keep the light on in one small small press corner, and that perhaps someone else will be using that corner for something else.

Wouldn't that be great?

NOTES

1. Ok, maybe a few works cited, apologies. I've given nothing in the way of a formal definition of the "small press" in these notes, so I offer this endnote with excerpts from other bits of writing in which I attempted to grapple with the question of how to define the small press.

This is from an as-yet-unpublished manuscript of essays:

> It is, of course, necessary to define my terms, but attempting to define the "small press" means confronting a vast and varied body of work in a staggering range of forms. I've tried to put forward concise definitions of the small press in various places over the years with varying degrees of success. Recently, I tried it more or less in this way: small press activities in Canada today encompass a range of different types of productions, from trade presses with national and international footprints to chapbook and micro presses that operate on a smaller scale; from perfect-bound, nationally distributed objects to handmade, photocopied efforts that circulate in hyper-local networks; from free handouts, to public performances, to websites, to blogs, to still other types of publications. Whether defined broadly as a form of independent publishing, a rhizomatic "network of multiple, asymmetrical, interconnected nodes" (Butling and Rudy 29), an "amorphous totality" (beaulieu and Christie 7), or a form of opposition to the "prevailing discourses of modern society" (Jones 22), the small press is constituted in part by the intimate relationship that it posits between writing, publishing, and reading. Small press writers are, more often than not, also small press editors, publishers, book designers, organizers of public events, critics, and primary readers. Two decades into the twenty-first century, the small press remains proudly resistant to concise definition.

And here are two excerpts from my dissertation:

> The problem remains today of establishing a single definition capable of bringing such a wide range of activity together, and perhaps more interestingly, the question of whether such a definition is even desirable. Jason Christie and derek beaulieu, introducing an issue of *Open Letter* dedicated to "Canadian Small Presses / Micropresses" in 2004, eschew definition and instead identify the small press as "a non-entity" (7) or "an amorphous totality impossible to capture precisely because of its fluidity" (7). Christie and beaulieu go further and insist that attempting to define the small press "in its entirety" (7) would be counterproductive and in fact undermine the goals of the small press; under the umbrella of a singular definition the "small press would then be subject to the same ideological baggage of canon formation and capitalist obligation" (7) as the broader field of Canadian literature. A single, central definition would impose a power structure based on exclusion. In contrast to capitalist obligation, Christie and beaulieu assert that the small press is a gift economy; "If money is exchanged it is in the manner of a donation or pittance—a symbolic exchange— instead of a standard in a competitive market" (7). What marks the small press, for Christie and beaulieu, is that such publishing requires a "dedication unrewarded in a capitalist economy" (8). Christie and beaulieu settle on the idea that the "necessity of the small press's amorphousness means that there should be no standard for what constitutes a small press document" (9), further opening the gates to an even wider range of activities. (32-33)
>
> The small press does not distribute books in traditional professionalized ways, rendering its publications difficult for bookstores, libraries, and archives to locate and collect. It publishes work that eschews categorization under poetry, fiction, or non-fiction, instead finding liberation in the rejection of such labels and consequently rendering its products difficult to fit into bibliographies and library catalogues. It produces books that are at times physically too small or too large to be adequately accommodated by traditional bookshelves, creating difficulties for librarians and institutions that are interested in collecting such work, as well as for mainstream bookstores. Moreover, these actions are motivated by a fundamental rejection of the pursuit of traditional consecration (in forms such as prizes, prestige, fame, and financial reward) and of the institutions that confer it. Small presses, because they are outwardly hostile to centralizing principles, disrupt such modes. (3)

2. Raymond Souster, in the poem "Self Portrait from the Year 1951," writes, perhaps sarcastically, of a poet "turning the crank of a mimeograph / in a basement cellar" in service to the production of "the typical / 'Little magazine' perhaps fifty will read, / Twenty remember (and with luck) five will learn from." There is exhaustion in these lines, and modesty, but I think there is also a realistic optimism. What I mean is I don't think Souster is dismissive of the results, though he sounds tired.

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SOME SILENCES

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These notes began in an email exchange with Justin Million in June 2022. Thanks to him for prompting this thinking in those emails (and other conversations over the years) and for hearing me out. Thanks also to too many people to name here who have had variations on this conversation with me. I think you know who you are.

Thank you, Jenn, for our life full of many wonderful things, including more than a few small press books, and for being my longtime first reader. Your encouragement started all of this.

Graphic elements on the title spread are a typewriter piece called "Star Axis"—modified to fit this page—that was composed during the writing of *Sheets: Typewriter Works* but was not included in the book.

Cameron Anstee is the author of two collections of poetry, *Sheets: Typewriter Works* (Invisible Publishing, 2022) and *Book of Annotations* (Invisible Publishing, 2018), and the editor of *The Collected Poems of William Hawkins* (Chaudiere Books, 2015). He is the editor and publisher of Apt. 9 Press.

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