

1 memory

*sound and evocation; Muzak, ambience and
aethereal culture; Brian Eno and perfume; Bali,
Java, Debussy*

Sitting quietly in never-never land, I am listening to summer fleas jump off my small female cat on to the polished wood floor. Outside, starlings are squabbling in the fig tree and from behind me I can hear swifts wheeling over rooftops. An ambulance siren, full panic mode, passes from behind the left centre of my head to starboard front. Next door, the neighbours are screaming - "... fuck you ... I didn't ... get out that door ..." - but I tune that out. The ambient hum of night air and low frequency motor vehicle drone merges with insect hum called back from the 1970s, a country garden somewhere, high summer in the afternoon. The snow has settled. I can smell woodsmoke. Looking for fires I open the front door, peer out into the shining dark and hear stillness. Not country stillness but urban shutdown. So tranquil.

Truthfully, I am lying in intensive care. Wired, plugged and electronically connected, I have glided from coma into a sonic simulation of past, and passed, life. As befits an altered state, the memories have been superimposed, stripped of context, conflated from seasons, times, eras, moments, even fictions, into a concentrated essence of my existence in the sound-world.

These sounds reconnect me to a world from which I had disengaged. Sound places us in the real universe. Looking ahead, I can see a plane enlivened by visually represented

objects. I can touch within a limited radius. I can smell a body, a glass of beer, burning dust. But sound comes from everywhere, unbidden. My brain seeks it out, sorts it, makes me feel the immensity of the universe even when I have no wish to look or absorb.

There are ear plugs, but then I just hear the sound of my own shell.

Not long born, still unable to control most of my own body, I stared at colour shapes and gripped objects as they came near. Far away, a dog barked. Then there were two worlds.

Now I am very old, too old. A stone-deaf baby. Who am I? These people sitting around my bed; who are they? One of them holds my hand. I press the button. Sound pictures wash them away. I am listening to a song in a school classroom: "Oh soldier, soldier . . ." Somebody is carrying a radio and an old pop song is playing: "See the pyramids . . ." I can hear the metal phase echoes of footsteps moving along an alleyway, wind in drainpipes, a tied-up dog howling. Enfolded in the stillness of Christmas Eve, church bells, police sirens and domestic rows. Sea sucked back over stones through the narrow rock corridor at Clodgy Point, Cornwall. A cave down on the beach; inside, I sound the echo with a bone trumpet, water dripping in a steady tattoo. Fences rattling in the wind on Dartmoor. Walking after midnight down the long tunnel of an underground station. A man walks alongside me, bright eyed with chemical joy. Australian vowels. "Hear that? Sirens. The sound of London." He looks down at my feet as we stride quickly in parallel. "Squeaky boots."

A bee trapped in a chimney flue, its buzzing amplified to room dimensions. The fizzing drone of a street light. A hotel room in Italy and close by a man and a woman are screaming their way to orgasm. Somebody shouts in the distance, drunk. Toads belch in the deep night and a motorbike whines by. I have a daughter; she is singing "Daisy, Daisy . . ." Sounds that have remained mysteries for decades: walking by a railway terminal on a Saturday morning and stopped dead by the eerie

lament of a train whistle choir. All those horns and whistles blowing at once. The air buckles. Did somebody die? Paradise is so dull. I listen for a moment to the woomph of mortar fire in thick jungle, vultures tearing strips from a corpse, car alarms, fire alarms, smoke detectors, house alarms and cement mixers.

And then the comfort note of air conditioning, the slow glide of electronic curtains. My exit, probably. But I still hear the sound of fleas jumping off my small female cat on to the polished wood floor.

soundbites

At a conference in Cairns, Australia, a scientist member of the American Rock Art Research Association claimed that prehistoric cave-painting sites were chosen by the artists for their reverberant acoustic character. Steven Waller speculated that each painting site reveals a correspondence between the animals depicted on the walls and the nature of any sound activating the echoes in that space. In caves such as Lascaux, where large animals were painted, the echoes are overwhelmingly loud, whereas in sites where felines adorn the walls, the decibel level of the reverberations is very low.

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